Hikaru ga Chikyuu ni Itakoro Volume1

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葵

Aoi

When Hikaru was on the earth

ヒカルが地球にいたころ……①

野村美月

イラスト◉竹岡美穂

ファミ通文庫

As you can see, I'm already dead, and I'm unable to fulfill my promise.

Can you please hand the presents to her in my my stead?

葵

Aoi.

When Hikaru was on the earth

ヒカルが地球にいたころ……①

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Author's Notes

It's just...
A little rumor.
Hikaru didn't
die from an ac-
cident, but was
actually killed
by someone.
Hiina Oumi
It's impossible for
you to express
Hikaru's feelings
Asai Saiga
Are you an
idiot? You'll
definitely get
dumped!
Honoka Shikibu
Liar!
Aoi Saotome.

Miss Aoi has always been like this.

Whenever she is extremely sad, whenever she felt like crying.

She would force herself to say 'there is nothing wrong', puff her face to look away, and cry.

I have been thinking that it will be great if Miss Aoi becomes my most beloved...

...Miss Aoi...was my 'hope'.

When did this happen?

Mikado Hikaru, who had all the sparkles gathered on him, who was beloved by all the flowers, suddenly died in an accident.

Before he was even 16--

I absentmindedly searched my memories as I listened to the news of his death over my cellphone.

I shed off the clothing called rationality because I wanted to see Hikaru.

My soul seemed to leave my body, flying in the night sky as I only cared about seeing him, seeing him, seeing him. I continued to run on the dirt path, let the grass cut my shins and ankles, let the icy cold rain pierce through my body, to where he was. Ahh, those were what happened yesterday.

Even if I were to become an evil spirit, I would still want to get to that person.

What enthralled me, more than that guy's cruelty, stubbornness, love for lies, fear of loneliness...more than anything else, was my love for that person.

I knew right from the beginning that our love was a forbidden cardinal sin. It was not permitted by this world, and no one around us would bless us. My body felt like it was cut, stabbed through and burned--it was a tragic romance and bitter love that was accompanied with sadness and despair.

I definitely must not let anyone else know, and I will continue to love him in this darkness where the moonlight cannot shine into. Did we not lock our fingers and swear?

That this was a secret for a lifetime.

But why did Hikaru say those words last night?

Amidst the icy cold bone-chilling rain, on the brink of death, that expression Hikaru showed--

Only I saw it all. That expression, those eyes, that act.

That was a cruel betrayal to love.

Hikaru.

At that time...

What were you thinking?

Chapter 1 – Aren't you already dead?

Uwaa…why are they all girls ?

Koremitsu Akagi surveyed the funeral, dumbfounded.

The combination of a high-class blazer and a black shirt composed the uniform of Koremitsu's school, Heian Academy. There were also other uniforms at Heian like a one-piece, sailor uniforms, vests, bolero jackets with ribbons – so many that it was shocking, the girls attending were wearing all kinds of distinct outfits.

But that was not all there was to see for Koremitsu.

There was a female university student in her own stylish black attire present, screaming grievously.

"Hikaru! Hikaru!"

A sorrowful woman stood alongside the student, carrying an air of scholarship about her secretarial appearance, and she covered her face with a handkerchief as her shoulders quivered uncontrollably. Behind the woman stood an opulent lady awash in tears, her eyes fixing the ground. Together in the crowd was a young girl who seemed to be a primary school student, and she was no exception with eyes swollen red, filled in tears.

Koremitsu used the school's bulletin board to check the funeral' s date beforehand. However, he soon regretted coming along at all.

Among the weeping girls stood a high schooler with messy red hair, his back bent, glowering sharp eyes and a frown, making him look an obtrusive sight to be seen.

Those attending the funeral would occasionally glance suspiciously at Koremitsu Akagi.

Even the fellow girls of Heian Academy uniform were alarmed, wondering why the infamous freshman was in attendance.

In spite of their discomfort, none of them dared to ask why he had come. They bit their lips and pretended to look at something asquint, averting their eyes uncomfortably to walk away.

Even if anyone were to ask Koremitsu the obvious, he himself couldn't supply an answer.

Really, why must I come to the funeral of this bastard who lived such an abundant life, when I never even talked to him much?

Hikaru Mikado's portrait was placed above some white sandalwood incense at the front of the hall, the space filled with mourners.

Hikaru's corpse lay among the crowd like an angel, with a smile on his face and adornment from tulips, lilies, and carnations.

He had a slender face, the nose delicate and lips plump; his skin was an immaculate white and each of his irises possessed a crystalline transparency. These qualities lent themselves to an effeminate purity and sweetness in Hikaru Mikado's resting body.

When they first met, Koremitsu wondered why a girl would be wearing a boy's uniform at school.

This was thought only before Koremitsu learned that this very affable boy with unique voice was known to others as the ' Imperial Prince' of the school.

He was not simply the school's 'Prince', but its 'Imperial Prince' , a title befitting the elegance of 'Lord Hikaru' much better. Female middle school graduates and newly-enrolled high schoolers were chatting dreamily about Hikaru Mikado in this vein, and that was how Koremitsu learned of Hikaru's place in Heian.

All the same, he was extremely popular, and many girls even started liking him when he was a student in the affiliated kindergarten.

Even in this school full of rich peers, his family background and wealth were considered outstanding. Despite this, he showed the same abundant affections and tenderness to every last girl.

"As expected, that guy is some handsome dude I have no affinity with whatsoever."

That was what Koremitsu thought before meeting Hikaru.

But, for some reason, Hikaru Mikado called out to Koremitsu with a grin when they met for the first time.

"There's something I want to ask you."

Koremitsu felt there was something wrong with Hikaru's statement back then.

He came to question whether he heard things wrongly after Koremitsu was told of Hikaru's death before those words made sense to him.

It was said that Hikaru drowned in a flood caused by heavy rain while staying at a resort in Shinshu, during the Golden Week.

Even though they had merely exchanged a few words, the fact that Hikaru died at the young age of 15 was a huge shock to Koremitsu, making him aware once again of how life was not permanent - how fleeting it was. He recalled his father's death, and felt bitter in his heart.

Koremitsu harboured such complicated, incomprehensible feelings as he went to Hikaru's funeral under the soft rains.

Koremitsu sat on the pipe chairs indoors with forlorn expression, vacantly staring at the funeral leader surrounded by women's anguished sobbing.

Hikaru was a beautiful child.

He was such a kind child.

He really had such a refreshing smile.

His voice was so nice.

And he had such delicate fingers – like a gifted artist's.

He was a little stubborn, but I can't bring myself to hate him for it.

He was scared of loneliness, but that made him adorable.

He was a child who looked like he could carry all the happiness in the world.

He was a child who seemed to be enveloped by light.

Everyone present was mourning and weeping for this young man and his premature death.

The funerary songs of remembrance fell upon Koremitsu's ears.

He really understood too little about this deceased person, and it was difficult for Koremitsu to understand the mourners' feelings .

He was awash in waves of sadness, annoyance, guilt, and unease.

At this moment, he noticed a woman sitting in a seat reserved for relatives.

She appeared young.

She was probably in her early twenties or so.

Her body was so frail-looking that she seemed like a flower about to snap at any time, and she was neither wearing a one-piece nor black kimono. Her hair was tied back.

The moment she entered Koremitsu's vision, he held his breath from the sheer impact of what he saw.

Mikado…?

At that moment, he had the wrong impression that Hikaru Mikado himself was sitting before him.

She bore a shocking resemblance to Hikaru.

Her smooth, silky hair looked golden under the light; she had milky white skin, a subtle yet elegant nose, lips like petals and a slender neck.

Is she Hikaru's older sister…?

The woman slowly smiled.

Those tears continued rolling down her delicate face, but the ends of her lips curled up a little.

It was a tranquil, pleasing smile.

Hers was a smile that did not fit a funeral scene. Koremitsu stood in front of the sandalwood incense, his nostrils heavy with its smell, and he gazed at her half-mesmerized.

Why…is she smiling?

She's smiling so beautifully, so—happily.

Why, at his funeral…?

This woman who looked like Hikaru's sister showed a smile that lasted for such a brief moment it felt like an illusion.

Koremitsu was so rapt by the display that he was beginning to space out. Before he could, a sharp voice in the crowd interrupted his thoughts.

"HE'S JUST A DAMN IDIOT!"

Startled, he glanced over in direction of the voice.

A girl wearing Heian Academy uniform was standing in front of Hikaru's mourning post.

Her long, black hair was left behind her head, tied with black ribbon. She gave off a childish vibe, looking quite the refined princess. As she clenched her fists she could not help but shudder, her large eyes almost appeared to emit an aura of furious contempt as she angrily stared at Hikaru's smiling portrait.

She let out scathing words from her trembling lips.

"YOU'RE REALLY AN IDIOT FOR DROWNING IN A RIVER LIKE THAT! THAT'S SO EMBARRASSING! I THOUGHT YOU WOULD BE STABBED TO DEATH BY A WOMAN! IT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE TOO MUCH OF A PLAYBOY THAT KARMA STRUCK BACK!"

"Don't do this, Aoi."

Instantaneously, a taller girl wearing the same uniform walked over. She grabbed her by the shoulder, clearly wanting to take her outside.

Prompted by the suggestive hand, "Aoi" lifted her head to see Hikaru's portrait again.

The side of her pallid, stiff face caused Koremitsu's heart to skip a beat.

It was a face mixed with anger, anguish and bitterness. A dangerous expression—

The young girl howled in disdain.

"YOU LIAR!"

Koremitsu felt like his heart was stabbed by a sharp spear.

In fact, he even felt a sharp pang to his heart.

(Whoa there…what kind of carnage is this?)

The place fell silent for a moment to regain its relative clamor moments later.

Folks started murmuring about what had just happened to one another.

Liar—

Koremitsu's mind was still thinking about her begrudging tone and her angry, yet pained expression.

Liar.

Liar.

Mikado's innocent face was right before her, but what could still have caused him to be told off like that?

"Liar." The word painfully lashed echos in Koremitsu's ears.

Even though Hikaru was dead, she continued to vent her frustration on him. Exactly what kind of relationship did she have with him?

Exactly what kind of lie did Hikaru tell?

Well…it has nothing to do with me anyway…

The prayer recital started, and the place became thick in solemn atmosphere.

The woman who looked so very similar to Hikaru, still sitting in the chair designated for family members, kept her head lowered.

The girl with the black ribbon who had been lambasting Hikaru started to fade away from Koremitsu's mind.

When it was his turn to offer incense, he held onto the sandalwood, closed his eyes and lowered his head.

What exactly did he mean when he said ‘There’s something I want to ask of you’?

However, there was a question that he just couldn’t get his mind off of.

Of course, it was impossible for Hikaru’s corpse in the coffin to give any answers.

Once the funeral ended, Koremitsu left. It was still raining outside – the weather dark and humid.

It’s so troublesome to carry an umbrella around…

He trod through wet ground as he walked out.

—*Mr. Akagi.*

For a moment, Koremitsu thought he heard someone call his name.

He stopped in his tracks and looked back.

…Maybe I’m just hearing things.

There were two girls in school uniform behind him (the ones who demanded the funeral's attention moments ago), their shoulders cringing, their bodies shivering as they sunk in the soppy ground.

Koremitsu felt an acute bitterness at their spectacle, and arching his back he continued away with a step.

Why is it that such a vulgar person had to visit Mr. Hikaru's funeral?

Hearing the disapproving murmur of the girls behind him at the funeral, Koremitsu clicked his tongue.

There were people in this world who were easily misunderstood.

The fifteen years of misfortune Koremitsu Akagi suffered was primarily due to his appearance.

He looked like he was brooding all the time, his eyes were often lowered and held an air of arrogance and derision, the mouth curled downward with unhappiness.

He had a stiff face that hinted of nothing amicable. His appearance was ominous – a sharp complexion, an arched spine, his scraggy body, and unkempt red-brown hair made him appear as though a complete delinquent should.

He replayed the host of misunderstandings he had experienced growing up.

When he was in kindergarten, students were scared of Koremitsu's savage expression and would back away from him in any social exchange. During his entrance ceremony in primary school, the girl sitting beside Koremitsu suddenly broke into wailing, and the other children nearby started to cry as well after noticing her, causing a raucous uproar of tearful children.

As things turned out, Koremitsu was accused of bullying the girl, and the mothers would teach their children not to play with him. Consequentially, Koremitsu lived a lonely life.

During middle school, Koremitsu got tangled with some upperclassmen hanging around empty lots on the school compound. In the process of getting away from them, he inadvertently earned himself the monikers of 'The King of Fighting ', 'The King of Delinquents,' and similar designations. With these names, he came to be viewed as a dangerous person. Koremitsu resultantly could not make a single friend in middle school.

And then, there was that unforgettable graduation ceremony.

While his classmates cried to one another as they parted ways, Koremitsu was isolated by them, an outcast left alone among the wilting sakura trees. There he thought to himself, *"I can't let this continue."*

Once Koremitsu entered high school, he made it his priority to forge new friendships to avoid the scornful pain of being called '

Red Devil', 'The Man of Disaster', 'The Savage-looking, Wild Dog', and other things.

That was what he decided.

However, on the day before the high school entrance ceremony, Koremitsu got hit by a truck at an intersection with lots of traffic, and abruptly found himself hospitalized for a month to recuperate.

After the accident, Koremitsu's aunt, who was also his guardian , went into a frenzy.

"Why do you get involved in one trouble after another! It was a miracle that you managed to pass the exam of a prestigious private school locally, and yet you ruin it by excusing yourself from the ceremony for the hospital? Even primary schoolers don't get run over on crosswalks!"

And went on a furious display.

Koremitsu would finally be released from grim life in a hospital bed, and the time had come for that eventful day where he could come to his new school for the first time.

He had a crutch tucked under his right armpit, his left hand in a cast, and his head wrapped in bandages as he walked down the long courtyard corridor.

"Damn it…where the heck is the staff room?"

He wanted to ask for directions, but everyone frantically parted aside at his sight, and before realizing it, Koremitsu had come upon a place devoid of that great mass of humanity in the halls.

It was a large courtyard, where beautiful trees were neatly arranged, stones of all shapes and sizes bedighted the verdant landscape, and even sparkling bodies of water were found throughout.

Heian Academy was school of remarkable fame that offered an integrated program of enrollment from its affiliated kindergarten to the university, and its dignitaries spent great sums of wealth specifically creating the courtyard.

During the previous winter, he came to Heian school for an entrance exam, and was simply astounded by the school's cleanliness and courtyard. He thought that since he could enter such a prestigious school, he would not have to face those upperclassmen who would go crazy without warning and pull out the knives from their modified uniforms, and that he could look forward to getting along with his classmates.

However, people were sure to keep their distance from him when Koremitsu entered this new school for the first time, and even ended up lost.

Damn it…everyone's judging each other based on looks.

They're saying my parents got me into this school through Mafia connections – that I fought some sort of delinquent army from another school and nearly killed them all, and that I was hospitalized as a result.

Hey, I can hear your insults! If you want to badmouth me like that, do it somewhere I can't hear it, okay!? I deserve to be treated with the bare minimum of manners, do you hear me!?

Sulkily, he proceeded down the corridor, his crutch sounding a tap with each start forward to accentuate his gait.

There seemed to be someone standing in the shadow of a pillar in front of him.

The person was simply standing there, and looked like he was simply leaning on the pillar. He was wearing a blazer and slacks—is he a guy?

The morning sunlight that shone into the atrium lit this soft hair , radiating a golden brilliance from his profile.

Why was such a person standing at this place so early in the morning?

Anyway, Koremitsu felt saved by the sight of this lone figure.

He wanted to approach them to ask where the office was, but they turned toward Koremitsu before he could start.

Huh? A girl?

The person had a softly delicate face, and therewith confusion struck Koremitsu. He wondered why a girl should be wearing a boy's uniform

No, wait, that's a guy– right?

Their clear eyes narrowed, and a warm smile splayed across their remarkably amiable countenance. The person's fine lips started to move.

"Mr. Akagi."

They let out a sweet voice.

Their voice almost held an allurement, as it reached the ears softly and gently, almost feeling like it had penetrated the very core of his essence. Koremitsu instantaneously froze.

"You're the first year, Mr. Koremitsu Akagi. This is the first time you're stepping into the school, right?"

"…How do you know my name?"

Koremitsu eyed the boy warily. Hikaru continued without a hint of dishonesty.

"Any freshmen like yourself would become the talk around here. It's said that you fought against a delinquent army, beat ten opponents to near death, became the 27th gang leader and the legendary 'King of the Delinquents'. It's also said that the injuries you sustained were marks of honor from battle, right?"

There was no one who dared to approach Koremitsu and talk, let alone someone who did not fear him, facing him head on and exposing a blissful smile.

That was why Koremitsu felt somewhat puzzled instead of upset over being called a gang leader here.

For some reason, the boy felt he could really talk with someone called a gang leader so nonchalantly…

For someone who looked like a girl, he sure has guts, huh? Or is he just slow? Or is he planning something?

Koremitsu told Hikaru the truth – that his face of a rebel's was something he was born with, that the injuries were a result of him being knocked down by a truck, that there were really no gang leaders around, and that he was not a delinquent.

"Then why did you block the truck with your body?"

He met the earnest question sidelong.

"…A coincidence."

"That makes quite the coincidence!"

"It can't be helped. It was just that – coincidental."

"Hmm, but I don't think a truck like that is something you could run into accidentally."

"…"

He really did not want to talk about the incident.

To Koremitsu, who was not used to having others talk to him, the way this boy spoke to him so naturally caused him to feel butterflies in his stomach.

The manner in which the boy looked back at him was like he was staring at a rare animal on exhibition, and it felt repulsive.

"…Where's the staff room?"

Koremitsu curtly inquired this original intent of starting conversation with the boy to end the butterflies presently aflutter in his gut; but the other person did not seem to mind.

"Head straight down, and at the end, turn left, go up the stairs, and onto the second level."

And he even guided Koremitsu.

"Oh, I see."

The sound of the pine crutch clattered again, and as they were to pass by each other inside, Koremitsu had his name called again.

"Mr. Akagi, I forgot my Classics textbook today. Can you please lend me yours?"

Huh?

Koremitsu stopped thinking for a moment.

"Why ask me to lend a textbook all of a sudden?"

Koremitsu turned around, and saw the other person staring right at him with his clear eyes.

"…Our class doesn't have Classics today."

He answered as he tried to guess the other person's intention.

"Eh, that's too bad."

He mused, giving off a meaningful smile,

"Then, I'll come over to your class to borrow your textbook then, Mr. Akagi. There's something I want to ask of you, too."

"Something you want to ask of me? What is it?"

It escalated from a simple request for borrowing a textbook to a request of personal favor, and this suspicious segue caused Koremitsu to frown.

"I'm Hikaru Mikado of Class 1. See you next time."

He waved his arm widely and walked off to the courtyard.

The image of that dazzling smile, a smile he thought brilliant as the sun, etched itself deeply into Koremitsu's mind.

"Kyah! Lord Hikaru!" "Good morning, Master Hikaru!" the girls' jubilant yells could be heard from the other side of a forest.

Koremitsu could only look stunned as he listened to the screams fade in the distance.

That was one week ago.

A week later, Koremitsu, who had his cast and crutch removed, saw the girls crying and wailing as he entered school, and heard the news that "'Lord Hikaru' has died."

In the end, Mikado never borrowed the textbook from me, and we only managed to talk once.

The road was dark, and the rain caused Koremitsu's vision to blur on his walk home.

He had been thinking about Hikaru's situation ever since the moment he left the funeral parlor.

There's nothing I can do…

Their sole meeting left a huge impact on Koremitsu, and the events of the funeral added to this experience.

Still, Koremitsu understood practically nothing about the person named Hikaru Mikado. Koremitsu still found himself thoroughly captivated by his casual attitude, his equally earnest demeanor and smile; it all remained an enigma.

What kind of person was Hikaru like, in reality?

If that guy didn't die, if he's still alive…will he really come over to borrow my textbook?

He will open the classroom door forcefully, give a radiant smile,

"Mr. Akagi! I forgot my textbook!"

And it'll be in a cheery tone, I guess?

This scene flashed through his mind in an instant, and his very core seared with a grating sensation. Perhaps this was the little sadness he had for the life of a 15 year old who had his life ended.

The downpour grew stronger.

The wooden home his grandfather built was located away from city center, a place functioning as a calligraphy house. By the time he got back, his messy red hair was sticking on his eyelids and ears .

He opened the main entrance, and in the doorway his aunt Koharu stood, holding some coarse salt.

"Koremitsu, turn your back around!"

She ordered him sternly.

Koharu would normally dress herself up in a jersey with rolled up sleeves and hem, her hair neatly tied behind her head with grace. A divorcée, she had returned home to work on an internet

marketplace business on the computer. At this point, she, Koremitsu and his grandfather were the only people living together.

He followed what she said and turned around, and soon after, the sound of salt being sprinkled on him rang.

(Isn't this too much salt for purification? Are you trying to marinate me with salt?!)

But even though he thought so, he chose to remain silent in light of the fact that the highest seat of authority in the household was gradually transferring from his grandfather over to his uncle, he chose to remain silent.

"Alright, turn around again."

He turned around, and a large helping of salt was sprinkled on his legs. His thoroughly wet clothes were littered with salt grains.

"The water in the bath is boiled. Go in a wash. Once you're done, have dinner, and don't dily-daly around."

She spoke with masculine tone.

Suddenly, there was a snicker from behind.

"Mr. Akagi 's sister really seems to be a violent and interesting. And she looks just like you."

(Un?)

At that moment, he stopped in his tracks.

What is it?

He thought he heard some unfamiliar voice here….

No, I probably misheard.

Koremitsu thought that he was tired as he was not used to attending funerals. Taking the towel Koharu handed over, he put it over his head and went on towards the bathroom.

After a soak in the bath, his body would feel relieved, and his mind refreshed.

He took off his blazer, undid the buttons of the damp and uncomfortable shirt , and took off his chaps.

The moment he opened the glass door of the bathroom, he heard that sweet voice ring again.

"Heh – you look rather lean, but those muscles make you look much different from myself. As expected of the king of the delinquents."

I'm not a delinquent.

No, before arguing back, who was the person talking to him just now?

His grandfather's voice was not this young, and this voice was too mild to be Koharu's.

"If I strip myself naked now, most of them will say that I'm pretty, look like a girl and have white silky skin or something. That really hurts my pride as a man here."

The voice seemed to be taunting him as its charming lure fell upon Koremitsu's ears. This sweet voice seemed oddly similar to the voice of the boy he heard when they met on the corridor.

However, that boy should have died several days ago; Koremitsu did attend the funeral earlier that day, and even burned incense.

"Your arms are rather lean too, but they sure look firm. That's my ideal size there."

Can a hallucination actually last this long here?

The voice felt so clear too, as if it was coming down from just above his head—

Incidentally, Koremitsu shifted his head to that direction, and in the next moment, screamed.

"UWWAAAHHH!!?"

How!? That boy with an angelic face – dressed in school uniform! Hikaru Mikado!

At the ceiling of the bathroom! Surrounded by steam!

He was floating in the air!

"Uh, huh? Are you able to see me here, Mr. Akagi?"

With the possibility realized, Hikaru's levitating body let out a cheer.

His hair, which looked golden with light partially filtered through its locks, lifted by a stray breeze as it and swayed atop Hikaru's small head.

Koremitsu grabbed the edge of the bathtub, his mouth still agape – his chin looked like it was going to fall to the ground. Hikaru reflexively widened his eyes peering down upon him. Hikaru's vaporous figure seemed just like an angel's, descended onto the Earth before Koremitsu. If he swapped his uniform for a bathrobe, the scintillating radiance could be to blindening effect.

Koremitsu met Hikaru's eyes, panting in conflict with the incredulity of it all.

"Are — aren't you already dead…?"

With no delay, his aunt Koharu slid open the glass panel and yelled into the bathhouse.

"What is it, Koremitsu!? Did you fall and hit your head? Don't tell me you have to be hospitalized again!"

In her right hand was the kitchen knife, manifestly because she was halfway through with the preparation of dinner.

"Ko-Koharu…there…"

Koremitsu shuddered as he pointed to the ceiling.

There was an effeminate specter in uniform floating before them . It was unknown if Hikaru was naturally genteel or if he went out of his way to treat girls so kindly, as he showed a smile for Koharu .

If she were a girl in her teens, she would have melted like a soft-serve. Her voice was yet somehow fraught with a tone suggestive of murderous intent as she derided Koremitsu for his commotion.

"Hah!? Did a cockroach stick on you? You're not a girl. Don't yap around like that because of such a small thing."

"Can't you see!?"

"Well, I can't see any cockroach or centipede from here."

Isn't there a guy wearing school uniform here!?

He wanted to yell it, but disposed of the thought after seeing her expression, signaling she might swing the menacing cooking knife upon him without hesitation.

Koharu shut the glass door and left.

"That's a fierce older sister you have."

Hikaru glazed over the fact that his trademark smile was ineffective as he said this.

Meanwhile, in Koremitsu's mind.

Calm down… Calm down…

Koremitsu repeated this to himself as he frantically sought the composure to figure out what was happening.

Hikaru Mikado, who should by all means be dead, appeared quite alive in Koremitsu's very bathroom.

He had legs, but his wispy body floated in the air.

And Hikaru was not visible to Koharu.

Koremitsu looked tentatively toward the mirror on the bathroom wall, saw that there was only his naked self reflected with a haze of steam, and looked back to Hikaru again.

He was still there.

Koremitsu again looked at the mirror.

The red-haired, wiry boy with menacing eyes went pale to the image he saw.

"Well, Mr. Akagi."

The voice closed in.

"!"

Koremitsu turned, seeing Hikaru behind him like a pet trainer ready for work with an overexcited canine, who said calmly.

"It's just like what you said, Mr. Akagi. I truly am dead now. This is why I feel this form must be my ghost."

Hikaru paused in contemplation.

"Yes, this much has to be the case. I'm not too sure of what it means to be a ghost, but I feel I am even without knowing a strict definition. I prefer the feeling of a fantastical existence over some convoluted science fiction, so it's better this way. You should see me in this light, too, Mr. Akagi."

What good is that? How can you be so convinced you're right!? A dead person suddenly appearing before the living is simply fantasy to you !? This is a disturbance of reality, not imagination!

He felt this wave of derision in his heart, but Koremitsu did not express it.

The only time when he actually believed in ghosts was in his days as a fledgling in school—a product of immaturity. In addition , the mirror's reflection bereft of a certain Hikaru still remained.

Koremitsu became tangled in the conflicted twine of common sense and observation.

"Here, have a look."

Hikaru reached his white, slender hand to touch Koremitsu's. It passed through him, and the skin and bone went through to the other side.

Koremitsu held in a powerful compellence to shriek. He did not want to see the sight of someone else's hand passing through his like that. It was all too illogical to him. He had goosebumps all over his body, as if there crept a centipede on his back.

Koremitsu reeled the shaken hand back to his chest, breathed a series of deep breaths, and said, "A—assuming that this is reality, and I'm not a ghost, even if you are a ghost, why must you appear in my bathroom?"

They were not friends.

They were not classmates at all.

They merely had that single interaction at Heian.

Hikaru gave a stunningly captivating look with those clear eyes to Koremitsu.

"It's not sudden at all. I've been above you ever since you were at the funeral parlor. I called you 'Mr. Akagi' during the funeral, and you looked back, remember?"

Koremitsu stupefied over Hikaru's words.

It was true that I felt someone calling me when I was returning home. So this guy here has been floating above my head ever since

that moment!? Has he been tailing me from behind when I walked home!?

"At that moment, I was wondering if I was stuck on you, Mr. Akagi. Of course, that's in occult terms."

"Oi! Why me? What did I do to incur your vengeance? Did you want to become the 27th chief or something? You want to fight me because I surpassed you? Did you talk to me on the corridor because of this? In that case, I'll give that position to you. You can call yourself whatever you want here. Or I can go engrave it on your tombstone too, with a carving knife."

Koremitsu's forehead had crossed veins popping with agitation. Hikaru made a relaxed smile as he replied.

"Not at all. I don't have a grudge with you at all."

"Then why?"

Koremitsu eyed him, Hikaru returning the gaze shamelessly.

"Didn't we have a promise?"

"Huh?"

Koremitsu was dumbfounded.

What promise?

"I had something I wanted to ask of you when I approached you to borrow the textbook."

A charming grin splayed across Hikaru's face as he looked at Koremitsu.

Koremitsu did not care about his awkwardness as he leaned his body forward to view Hikaru.

"Hey, what is it that you requested me for?"

Ever since he heard of Hikaru's death, Koremitsu could not help but feel bothered by it, as if there were a bone stuck in his throat.

What was the "matter" Hikaru wanted to tell him of?

Hikaru requested him, someone he did not know, someone whom he had met for the first time.

Hikaru requested Koremitsu, someone who was infamous for being a savage delinquent – someone others would shy away from .

Hikaru's smile disappeared, and his expression turned to sadness. He averted his gaze and fell silent with Koremitsu's question.

"…"

Hey, why isn't he saying anything now? Why does he look so upset?

Koremitsu became impatient with Hikaru's now-solemn expression.

He felt an uncomfortable cold sweat as he awaited a reason behind the silence. At this moment, Hikaru curled his lips and gave a thin smile.

"About that…forget about it."

He muttered it softly.

"Huh!? What does that mean!?"

Koremitsu's tone had inadvertently become gruff. The situation developed into something Hikaru would feel bad about, so the forcefulness of Koremitsu's reply came to be lamentable.

"Don't try to pull a fast one on me. You'd better tell me the truth here."

Koremitsu puffed his cheeks as Hikaru clapped his powdery white hands together and apologized.

"I'm sorry. Actually, I think I had a little memory loss when I died. I can't remember now."

Are you kidding me!?

Koremitsu shot him an interrogative stare, Hikaru smiling back once more.

"However, it's rare to have such a promise, and since we've met even after my death, I would like to ask you for another request."

"Another request, you say!?"

Hikaru nodded obediently.

"Yes. I'm definitely stuck with you, so I hope that I can get your help here."

Hikaru's eyes peered into Koremitsu with an inexplicable gravity – like everything in the vicinity would succumb to their power.

The prince of the school.

Koremitsu could finally understand why everyone at school gave Hikaru this nickname; it was beseeming of his majestic, regal presence.

—I can be forgiven by anyone no matter what I do.

Koremitsu nearly agreed to do anything the other party wanted after beholding that lovely grin.

Not good!

He did not know why, but his instincts rang alarm from deep within.

He had the vexatious feeling that he would be pulled along by Hikaru's front if things kept up. The realization jolted through him like lightning.

"Koremitsu! How long are you going to talk to yourself in the bathroom like that!? Have you become friends with the cockroach!? Get out once you're done!"

Koharu had again slammed the glass panel open to yell.

"Oh, okay."

Koremitsu hurriedly reached down to retrieve a bucket for covering his lower body.

"…She says I'm a cockroach?"

Hikaru mused, seemingly devastated by this.

"Wow! A Chabudai[1]. To think that it still exists in Japan."

While Koremitsu, Koharu and grandfather were having dinner in the dining room, Hikaru looked like a prince who finally entered a peasant's house as he curiously floated around the house. He would exclaim whenever he saw something, and would observe with wide eyes, without looking away and give a smile.

"Ah, the yam's cooked! It looks really delicious oily like this~ So good. It has that motherly flair to it. I want to try it out too~"

Koremitsu, who started to grab his chopsticks to cater to his salivating tongue, felt his hunger partially subsided with the famished set of eyes probing him at the table.

Aren't you a ghost? You can't eat.

Koremitsu wanted to speak, but he stopped himself after seeing Koharu and his grandfather continue their meal with their usual expressions.

Looks like gramps and Koharu really can't see this.

The recurred proof of his situation caused another headache for Koremitsu.

"Hey, this piece of calligraphy is written expertly. Who wrote it?"

Gramps.

"What's this raccoon decoration here for?"

Who knows?

"Ah, this sliding door is covered by sticking Washi[2] over it. Ah, here too! Did you repair them by yourselves? That's very handy of you."

Don't go cooing over such minor things.

Taking his chopsticks again, he grimaced at Hikaru.

"Koremitsu, what have you been looking at since just now?"

Koharu asked the question not for an answer but to give Koremitsu a warning. Koremitsu's venerable grandfather, having been born before the war, also lectured him.

"Don't drop rice all over the place. You'll get divine retribution."

Koremitsu cringed his neck.

Hikaru was meanwhile admiring the sliding door with fascination, "Ah, this is covered up with chiyogami[3] and cut in the shape of a tortoise shell…"

Koremitsu thought that this was all Hikaru was doing.

"Mr. Akagi, Kokeshi Dolls! The Kokeshi Dolls are lined up. Do you collect them? They're really cute! These narrow eyes are really a form of Japanese Beauty!"

Here Hikaru was thrilled over sundry baubles again.

Shut up over there! You're already dead!

Koremitsu had stopped himself from speaking out of irritation for another time that day.

He would be troubled if Hikaru's airy form might squat in a room of the house as a baleful ghost seeking vengeance for a misdeed.

Either way, he felt the need to make haste in taking Hikaru out of his sight, lest Koharu and his grandfather misunderstand anything more.

Koremitsu would normally eat an extra serving of rice for dinner, but that luxury had to be forgone.

"I'm going away."

He let out a low growl as he muttered, "Why act so cool when you're just returning to your own room here? You want to go raid a yakuza base or something here!?"

Koharu had yapped something back.

"First, sit down before we begin."

Koremitsu returned to his room, closed the door, threw a cushion onto the tatami[4] and ordered Hikaru.

"Mr. Akagi, I am happy that you're inviting me with a cushion as well, but I don't suppose there's any significance in giving me a cushion. However, I do understand your intentions."

Hikaru bent his knees slightly over the cushion as he floated in the air.

Koremitsu started.

"WHO'S WELCOMING YOU HERE!? THE HAIRS ON MY BACK ARE STANDING WHEN YOU'RE FLOATING IN FRONT OF ME LIKE THIS. AT LEAST PUT YOUR FEET—no, wait, knees on the floor—ANYWAY, IF YOU WANT ME TO LISTEN TO YOU

HERE, YOU'D BETTER SHOW ME THAT YOU'RE SINCERELY TRYING TO ASK ME HERE!"

Koremitsu's face had changed colors as he yelled.

"Okay, I understand."

Unexpectedly, Hikaru knelt down onto the floor and put his knees together to sit properly on the cushion.

Even so, he was practically sitting in a 'Seiza', and his back looked straighter than Koremitsu's, who sat with his back arched. It was perfect other than the fact that the cushion did not sink at all .

"Is this good? Are you willing to listen to me now?"

Hikaru flashed his trademark smile of allure.

How do I say this? This guy…can really mess up my rhythm.

Koremitsu thought as he sat cross-legged on the floor.

"Well, I'll just hear you out now."

"If possible, I hope that you can help me, too. Actually, there is a girl I can't let go of in my heart. Her birthday's coming soon, and on the last day of Golden Week, I sent a letter attached with Lilacs to her home."

Why must you use plant stems to tie the envelope? Can't you send her a phone message?

Koremitsu was perplexed.

Then, Hikaru's eyes and lips looked like they were emitting sweetness.

In this letter, he wrote,

"This is the first present. I prepared another 6 gifts for your birthday. Please look forward to it."

Are women the greedy enough not to be satisfied without receiving 7 gifts? Don't you have to spend lots of money if you have to give 7 gifts for every birthday? Before we even talk about that, how were you able to think of what 7 presents to give?

To Koremitsu, gift giving for a lady was a concept from another dimension.

But Hikaru showed a melancholic expression in his eyes.

"*As you can see, I'm already dead, and I'm unable to fulfill my promise. Would you please hand the presents to her in my stead?*"

"So, you're requesting me to do something related to a girl here."

"*Yes. To me, she is a very important girl.*"

Hikaru's eyebrows perked up as he showed his ever sweet, soft charm. Koremitsu showed a contrastingly unhappy expression.

"I'm not doing it."

"Eh—!? Wa-wait, aren't you rejecting me too quickly here, Mr. Akagi ?"

This was the first time Hikaru, who had been so carefree even after becoming a ghost, showed signs of faltering.

Koremitsu kept frowning, "I won't talk about requests concerning girls."

"Why!?"

"Gramps told me not to get close to girls."

"What does that mean?"

"20 years ago, his wife – my grandmother – said that she wanted to start a second life, and left divorce letters before she went off."

Ever since it happened to him, his grandfather's catchphrase was that "women are all like this," and he would often quarrel with Koremitsu's aunt Koharu as a divorcée who often said in the same derisive manner that "men are all like this." According to Koharu, it was to be expected that Koremitsu's grandmother could not stand his grandfather.

"This…this might have been quite a shock to your grandfather, but your grandmother can't possibly represent all females."

"During the first year of my elementary school, the woman called my mother dumped my father and I, and eloped with another guy."

"*Uw!*"

Hikaru was immediately rendered speechless.

"And also, the guy she went with was my homeroom teacher."

"*Ehh.*"

"And then, half a year later, my dad died of a heart attack."

"*Is-is that so. You've really had it tough up til now. Your — your father really suffered quite a tragedy too…but this girlfriend of mine won't hand me divorce papers or elope with another guy. It's not like I want you to go out with her or get married either. I just want you to send her the presents on her birthday, and then I can go to Heaven happily. See, it'll be bothersome if I keep sticking alongside you all the time, right?*"

The meaning hidden within those words was that Hikaru was threatening Koremitsu with continued haunting unless his request was made. Hikaru retained a pitiful expression.

"*Please~? It's a very important promise. I don't have any real friends, so I can only ask you here, Mr. Akagi.*"

"You're actually saying that you have no friends? Keep trying to bluff me here. Aren't you some extremely popular socialite?"

He was born with a dazzling appearance, and his personality was so refreshing it was endearing. He was also the 'Prince' of the school, someone surrounded by obsequious followers. To Koremitsu, it was an infuriating thing someone like him could say they "did not have any friends."

How could this flippant guy understand the pain of being left aside when the teachers instruct the students to 'team up in pairs' during Physical Education or Arts classes?

Everyone scattered from me like spiders when I was just walking around, asking for directions to the teachers' staff room. There's no one I could talk with during class breaks, I have difficulty spending those 10 minutes of break, and I can only use that time to keep revising work. How can some naïve young lord like you understand the pain of being excluded ?

However, Hikaru shrugged his shoulders as he muttered sadly.

"It's true…I was always popular with the girls ever since I was in kindergarten, and all the girls in my class wanted to be my girlfriend. During the class meetings in primary school, they went through a long discussion, which amounted to 'Hikaru belongs to everyone, so no one can elope with him here' and ended up with this agreement."

…Is he just bragging here? Speaking of which, those elementary school students sure are annoying to use this majority vote to decide things here.

The more Koremitsu listened, the more his lips started to twist in a frown.

"But because of this, the boys would often exclude me."

On hearing that, Koremitsu's ears suddenly twitched.

(You were…excluded?)

"It was the same during Physical Education Class. Nobody would pair up with me."

Koremitsu's ears twitched again.

"It was the same when I entered middle school. I was called up by a group to the back of the sports hall, saying that I snatched their girlfriends. They were looking for trouble with me…making all sorts of bad rumors to a point where none of the boys in class were willing to speak up for me…"

Koremitsu imagined that scene and felt a pain inside his chest, as if there was something stuck within.

He understood more than anyone else the pain of being excluded due to vilified rumors.

He recalled how he had to eat lunch alone during noon break, he recalled how he would move his chopsticks silently while hearing the laughter and chatting of his classmates. He recalled the despicable people who were overly bored and used compasses to doodle on his table, calling him names like "Sam" and "John" and all sorts of things.

Every time he recalled that, his eyes would feel hot.

Is that so? So this guy understands such pain?

So he lived through such bitter days?

He wants to fulfill a promise to a girl he can't let go of in his heart, but he has no friends. He's so lonely that he can only rely on me.

Is that so? Is that how it is?

This is really unbearable, damn it.

"It…it can't be helped…I'll just help send the presents in your stead."

Koremitsu blinked his eyes and looked aside and said this stiffly.

On hearing this, Hikaru heaved a sigh of relief and said,

"Thank you! I knew that you'll help me, Mr. Akagi. Really, thank you."

The words full of undiluted graciousness and trust caused something hot to rise up his throat.

"I'll go to…the toilet."

He lowered his head and hurriedly left the room to avoid letting others see the salty and spicy juices on his eyelids.

He opened the toilet door, used his fingers to wipe away his tears, sighed, took off his pajamas pants with his underwear—

"!"

But there was a slightly apologetic looking Hikaru floating above the toilet bowl.

"WAH!? WHY MUST YOU FOLLOW ME HERE!? AND YOU'RE EVEN LOOKING AT MY PRIVATE PART HERE! ARE YOU A PERVERT!?"

"I saw both front and back earlier when you were in the bathroom."

In the face of the flustered Koremitsu, Hikaru sighed slightly and showed a serious look, saying,

"There is something unfortunate I have to tell you of."

Wha-what is it?

Koremitsu held his breath as he listened, and Hikaru tried his best to lighten the shock as he calmly explained.

"It seems that no matter where you go, I will be dragged along with you. So please don't mind me and continue on."

</noinclude>

Chapter 2 - It Seems His Highness the Prince Likes Girls the Most

After many trials, Koremitsu and Hikaru found that it was possible for Koremitsu to maintain a certain distance from Hikaru in spacious areas. They could only be distanced a maximum of three meters from one another. In cramped spaces like a porta potty, they would be forced together in proximity. If Koremitsu did not move, Hikaru would be unable to leave the space.

What kind of joke is this? Now we have to stick together just to use the toilet?

The occasional couple of friendly girls might have held hands before going into separate stalls, but sharing the same lavatory was downright awkward for two boys. Intensifying the issue for Koremitsu and Hikaru to share a washroom was the fact that, above all, they were mere acquaintances.

Koremitsu recalled the uncomfortable feeling of facing Hikaru and urinating, his face feeling like it seethed with fire as he blushed.

Nothing seemed more troublesome than Hikaru's presence. Hikaru's request needed to be fulfilled as soon as possible so he would ascend into Heaven.

The next morning, Koremitsu walked into school with this steadfast determination.

"This is my first time riding on a bus full of people."

Hikaru poked out his head playfully from a gap in the mass of humanity aboard, the many passengers inside packed like a can of sardines. There seemed nothing more supernatural than the sight of his wispy face overlapping those of strangers in such a crowded setting.

He was not concerned about Koremitsu, who had been looking away from him deliberately. Hikaru went on muttering to himself once they each got off the tram and started for school.

Along the way, Hikaru turned to speak.

"I used to be a gardening rep, and we're to bury seeds like Dahlia and Lemon Grass this May. What activity are you involved in, Koremitsu?"

Unaware of it, Hikaru had called him "Koremitsu" instead of " Mr Akagi."

Koremitsu opened his mouth to chide Hikaru for being overly familiar with him, but Hikaru interjected.

"I said that because we are both 'designated' as friends from now on. It would be distant of me to call you Mr. Akagi at this point in time, right? You can call me Hikaru, too, Koremitsu."

He continued instantaneously, making a segue away from any argument.

"So, what did you do? You joined a martial arts club, right? Was it boxing or kung fu?"

"I was a member of the Pet-Raising Committee in elementary school. At the time, I took care of turkeys and rabbits."

Frowning, Hikaru gave a slightly subtle response.

"I see. So you liked animals."

"Turkeys are delicious when baked."

The words fell without any complement from Koremitsu.

"That red nose is really cute. Just like a Red Spider Lily."

Hikaru did not seem to mind as he continued the conversation one-sidedly.

Was this carefree prince really aware that he had died?

Koremitsu held back from throwing a tantrum over him as they stepped through the elaborate school gate.

Heian Academy was a school with all educational facilities from an affiliated kindergarten to university. The middle school and high school had different gates, but were located in the same area of campus.

Koremitsu took his shoes from the locker and started changing into them.

"Ah."

Hikaru let out a sigh.

He read a school news report with a photo of when he was alive pinned to the notice board in the corridor.

There were pieces of colored paper stuck beside it, with words of grief handwritten over each.

"Farewell."

"I loved you most."

"I definitely won't forget you."

"Lord Hikaru, you were once our youth."

Even now, there were still girls crowding at the board, their eyes bleating red as they wrote messages.

Among them, there was a girl who was crying as she read each of their sentiments. She covered her face in both hands, her good friend beside her in consolation, despite being teary-eyed just the same.

Koremitsu felt his entire body being tied down to the ground.

I say, even though you don't have friends, aren't a lot of people sad over your death here?

His body felt a slicing agony, and his chest was ablaze with heat .

He thought that Hikaru might shed a tear, but a gentle voice rang beside him instead.

"You are like a Daisy swaying in the spring breeze. Please, don't cry. Tears don't fit you."

Hikaru unexpectedly approached the sobbing girl, reaching his hands to her back.

He slipped his arms around and embraced her as though she were a fragile item with what seemed to be remarkable experience (however skillful the display was, though, his disembodied arms entrenched within the girl's body). He proceeded to speak softly into her ear.

"Do you know what the Daisy represents in the language of flowers? It means to be 'cheerful'. Here, smile. Show me that cheerfully smiling face of yours."

The scene left Koremitsu at a loss for words.

What, exactly, was going on?

Hikaru closed his eyes slowly and let out a certain sweetness from between his lips. A glowing radiance seemed to emit all around him as he let out a spine-meltingly enchanting voice.

"…Oi."

Koremitsu stood by with a frozen expression as Hikaru again approached another girl, held onto her trembling, little hand, and passionately brought his lips to her ears.

"Over here, you who are like a Blue Cornflower, please pull yourself together. Cornflowers represent 'happiness' here. Aren't you normally bubbly and radiating with hope?"

He floated around and appeared among the girls who wept, stroking their hair and clasping their hands.

"To you, who is like a Buttercup in the wild: You look cute when you smile. Ah, the one who's like a Snowdrop there, the same goes for you as well. If you cry like that, your beautiful eyes will melt away. Will you stop crying if I kiss you?"

He held the face full of large, rolling teardrops in both hands as he gently came nearer. At this point, Koremitsu could not contain himself.

"STOP IT RIGHT THERE, YOU BIG PERVERT!!"

Hikaru was taken aback as he turned to look at Koremitsu.

Koremitsu furiously stormed at Hikaru.

"What love messages are you spouting off!? Think of your own predicament here! This isn't the time to talk about such squirmy things behind other people's backs! Are you an idiot!?"

Hikaru wasn't accepting of Koremitsu's frustration as he rebuked.

"To me, I can't imagine myself leaving a crying girl alone. If you see a wilting flower, won't you feed it with water and fertilizer and take care of it with all your strength?"

"Like that has anything to do with me! I was a pet feeder! I wasn't a gardening rep!"

"Then, if you see a wounded cat, you should cradle it gently and treat its wounds, right?"

"Of course not. Stray cats will just lick their own wounds."

"There are some wounds that can't be treated just by yourself…hey, Koremitsu, the others are looking at us here."

The moment Hikaru pointed this out, Koremitsu felt paralyzed.

Of course, there was no way anyone else could hear Hikaru's voice.

He looked around stiffly, realizing an empty space of some two meters in radius that came to form around him.

The girls ceased crying as they cringed at the sight of Koremitsu with horrified expressions. The moment their eyes met Koremitsu's, their shoulders jerked, and they looked away.

Don't I look like some dangerous guy who'd yell without warning in the corridor?

He had originally decided to act decently in school so that he would not be nicknamed anything embarrassing like 'The Red Devil' ever again. Would his plan be ruined now?

"Ah…erm…"

He strongly wanted to salvage the situation in some way, but stronger forces meant that he could only give off cold sweat. He was rendered speechless in the shock of the moment.

Slowly, his face was burning up.

This is bad. Is my face red now?

"I…I'm not talking to you guys—at all!"

He snarled with a flustered look on his face and hurriedly left the scene.

"Don't worry, Koremitsu. Your reputation won't be shaken just by entering the school and yelling in the corridor all of a sudden. Besides, you're the 27th king of delinquents, who single-handedly beat up an entire army of delinquents. There is no worse reputation than this, now, so please relax."

What kind of consolation is that!?

He swore in his heart never to speak to Hikaru in front of anyone again.

Due to the shame and regret of his mishap, Koremitsu's expression felt three times scarier than usual - his eyes ten times sharper. He reached the classroom, opened the back door, and found a petite girl standing before him, nearly passing out on the spot.

"Hah…good, good morning…Akagi."

A plain, bespectacled girl who wore her hair in a short braid, she was the class representative.

Koremitsu did not know her name, and the other classmates called her 'rep' just as well.

He remembered the first day he stepped into this school after being hospitalized.

"I heard that he's the legendary delinquent…"

"Students from other schools came looking for trouble with him during Middle School, and there was a bloody incident…"

"He beat 10 people to near death."

There were all sorts of outlandish rumors about him.

He was avoided by his classmates, who came to believe these rumors as they became increasingly worse with time, and she was eventually the only person who would talk to him.

Even so...

"We-well…I'm the class representative…pl-please take care of me, Akagi. If- if there's anything you don't know, you may ask me."

Her face was markedly tense. She was so nervous her greeting could only be uttered in a sort of shrill.

"Thanks. Where's the canteen?"

That was what he wanted to say, but just as Koremitsu was about to answer back, the class representative hastily spoke.

"Th-the-then, in that case, I'll take my leave."

She seized the opportunity and darted back to her seat like a rabbit desperately fleeing ravenous wolves.

Koremitsu watched as she kept her hands clasped together; shuddering at her desk, obviously praying that he would not try speaking with her. If he actually got to ask where the cafeteria was back then, she would probably have screamed and hid herself under the table.

Even though it ended up this way, she still fulfilled her responsibility as a class rep, and whenever her eyes met Koremitsu

, she would characteristically tell him “Good- good morning.” Or “ Good- goodbye.”

Normally, she would walk away immediately after saying her piece, but she remained this time where she was, tentatively asking him a question.

“Akagi…you attended Lord Hikaru’s funeral yesterday, didn’t you-- are you familiar with him?”

It seemed that she, too, was present at the time.

He wanted to answer that they were not really on close terms, but beside him, Hikaru nagged, saying that they were designated as friends.

“We are close friends now, Koremitsu.”

Since when are we close friends!?

There has to be a limit to your shameless attitude!

Just when he was about to yell out, he recovered, gritting his teeth with a frown.

That was a close call. I nearly scared everyone again.

The next moment, however, the class rep was jumping like a hare.

“So-sor-sorry for asking you in such an interrogative manner. It’ s fine, you don’t have to answer here!”

Her face turned red and she ran off.

He looked angry when he gritted his teeth and frowned, so it came as no wonder that she was terrified. She returned to her own seat, her short braid trembling with prayer as before.

"A girl like her, who gets shy very easily, is really as cute as a plum blossom changing colors."

Hikaru spoke in a relaxed tone.

No, that's not being shy. She… looks terrified, no matter how I see it.

Koremitsu wondered that if he were to think about things enthusiastically like Hikaru, he would probably die with a smile on his face, too. He felt envy towards Hikaru for this, but did not want to allow these feelings to get the best of him as he went to put his bag onto his desk.

Koremitsu's seat was closest to the corridor, on the last row.

He glanced at the seat opposite the narrow aisle. The girl seated there did not look cheery this morning as she pouted and frowned, handling her cellphone.

She composed messages by sliding her fingers rapidly across the screen.

She was always using her phone, whether it was before school or during a break.

Her bright, tea-colored hair went down her slender shoulders, covering the temples and nestling upon her ears. Koremitsu noticed her fingers did not stop. Her eyes carried a certain ferocity as they glared more intensely than before, and she seemed engrossed in the messaging as she stared at the screen of her phone.

She completely ignored the savage delinquent beside her.

It was one thing for Koremitsu to be troubled by everyone's fear of him, but it was something worse that she paid him virtually no mind at all. She did not even make a glance at him, let alone greet him. One might wonder what her problem was.

The girl sat beside a frustrated Koremitsu, still minding her own business as if nothing was amiss. She had a strong will in her heart to match her utter fearlessness.

No, I guess she is also mistaken to have a violent personality because she was born with fierce-looking eyes and left alone because of it. This is why she's been using her phone to pass the time. She's probably someone very lonely.

This line of reasoning brought the flame in his stomach to quell.

But to Hikaru, hovering beside him, it seemed that no matter how strange the girl's carelessness about anything around her was - no matter how she ignored Koremitsu's presence - they were both points of attractiveness.

"A girl that's thoroughly focused on doing something is just like a crimson Hibiscus. Is she sending a message to her boyfriend?"

Hikaru tried to peep on the contents of the phone.

"Hey, stop it."

Koremitsu warned him softly.

The moment he said that, the girl beside him stopped her fingers from typing at the keys, and turned to glare at Koremitsu.

Her eyes were giving off a sharp glint, like a feline unwilling to be approached

He wanted to explain that he was not talking to her, but he did not say so.

He decided to glare at her, something he regretted doing.

A male classmate yapped loudly as he sprinted off to the classroom door.

"Oi! The Delinquent King suddenly went crazy at the shoe lockers! It seemed that he yelled at the sobbing girls leaving their messages at Lord Hikaru's notice board, 'WHAT ARE YOU CRYING ABOUT, YOU BUNCH OF LEWD FEMALE DOGS! I CAN LICK YOU ALL UP IF YOU REALLY WANT HIM THAT MUCH!' That's really barbaric, satanic—ack!"

He probably let out the 'ack!' at the end was because he sensed the murderous desire radiating from Koremitsu's body.

At that moment, he became soaked in cold sweat, at a loss of what to do.

"No…er-erm…'The Delinquent King' doesn't refer to our ' Master Delinquent' in this class…th-they're from another class… well, erm, about that…I'M REALLY SORRY!"

The boy knelt down on the podium to beg for forgiveness, and his onlooking classmates had the color leave their faces.

I'm the Delinquent King no matter what now? What are you apologizing for, you idiotic bastard!?

As Koremitsu's heart sank into despair, the culprit Hikaru spoke with amazement as he gave a look of lamentation.

"Wow, this is the first time I've seen someone kneel for forgiveness. It sure has an unforgettable impact on me. I'll definitely do this to a girl next time."

While the commotion continued, the girl sitting next to Koremitsu kept to her frown as went on messaging.

The freshman, red-haired delinquent had forced his classmate to kneel down and 'apologize'.

Once that classmate apologized, he was unable to even walk properly, had difficulty talking, and retired for the day.

This rumor quickly circulated around school.

After class, a depressed Koremitsu arched his back as he sauntered down the 3rd level corridor.

The students who brushed by him kept their distance, avoiding him like a plague.

"Cheer up! There's nothing that can shake your legend as the strongest now."

It still can't be considered consolation at all!

My already-poor reputation just took a turn for the worse. Whose fault do you think it is here!?

This carefree bastard here's already dead, and yet he's still trying to hook himself up to girls without any restraint.

"…Don't you realize that you have a responsibility here?"

He clenched his fists as he muttered the question.

"Eh, because of me? But Koremitsu, I still feel that when I see a crying girl, I should comfort her with my best effort."

Hikaru spoke almost like he was narrating his beliefs.

"Well, once my wish is granted, I'll go to Heaven peacefully. I'll cause you a lot of troubles before then, but please endure for now."

Hikaru's voice carried an admiring tone, and it was hard to begrudge him any further.

He looked like an easygoing prince, but he was unexpectedly clever.

I know this and still hang out with him.

Koremitsu turned to look at Hikaru and question him.

"Let me ask you again. That girl's definitely in the arts club, right?"

The moment those words were said, Hikaru's eyes grew tender and that amorous drive of his kicked into gear.

"Yes. She would always be painting in the arts room after school. She's like a princess from the Heian era. Her silky black hair is dazzling. She's delicate, pure, extremely refined as a lady, and a very cute girl."

Even if you talk about your own lover like that, I can't feel anything at all.

This was a reference to the princesses of the Heian Era, such as those mentioned in the textbook who wore Ceremonial Dresses[5] The raiment was often tight and the wearer's body would bulge. Furthermore, the girl's long hair would be troublesome to wash, and it seems disgusting to have many fleas and lice inside.

What exactly am I thinking of here?

"But she's your girlfriend, and you are on good terms to the point that you were planning to celebrate her birthday together, right? It was your funeral yesterday. Won't it be hard for her to attend club activities after such great loss?"

Perhaps she was resting at home, unable to attend school.

However—

"Ahh, yes, you don't have to worry about this. Aoi will definitely be in the arts room like usual."

Hikaru's voice sounded vague all of a sudden as he looked away subtly.

"Huh?"

Koremitsu betrayed his concern about this aloud.

Well, it's fine, I suppose. If she's here, I can hurry up and settle this quickly.

He did not delve his thoughts into the matter any further as he arrived in front of the arts room. He then proceeded to open the door.

Wah! They're all girls!

The aroma of perfume fluttered in the wide classroom. Bright sunbeams shone in through the wide windows, and there were tables, chairs, plaster statues, canvas littered all over.

There were probably eight girls inside.

They were doing their own designs, coloring, reading magazines that were left aside and doing manicures for each other as they chatted away.

To Koremitsu, all the girls looked the same to him.

At the same time, the girls on the opposite side were stunned by the arrival of the legendary red-haired delinquent who had suddenly barged in.

The classroom immediately descended into silence.

Their frozen expressions and terrified eyes signified a strong fear and helplessness. One of the girls doing a manicure was holding a cover in one hand and glass bottle in the other as she shuddered to Koremitsu's glance.

"Ah…is someone called Aoi Saotome in?"

He felt a pain near his stomach, probably due to nervousness, and his expression was more stricken than usual. His wolf-like, sharp eyes were something he was born with, and he could not change it.

The club members were all afraid as they retreated to the window.

At this moment, there was a girl exuding certain pride who continued to paint alone.

Her locks were long enough to reach her waist, and had a pretty white butterfly ribbon tied on. She was a little shorter than average , and she looked thinner than average, too.

Huh? Where have I seen this person before…?

As he tried to recall the girl's identity, she stood up and gave a menacing expression as she walked toward Koremitsu.

Her limbs were extremely thin, and her face was so small Koremitsu could cover it with his hands.

Her long hair without frills swayed sweetly to the girl's stride. Long eyelashes were like a framed border to her eyes, which were so large they looked like they were about to drop, and she shot a belligerent look at Koremitsu.

The moment he saw her stern expression, he realized it.

I see! She's the one who caused the commotion at Hikaru's funeral!

"YOU'RE REALLY AN IDIOT FOR DROWNING IN A RIVER LIKE THAT! THAT'S SO EMBARRASSING! I THOUGHT YOU WOULD BE STABBED TO DEATH BY A WOMAN! IT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE TOO MUCH OF A PLAYBOY THAT KARMA STRUCK BACK!"

There was no doubt that she was that girl.

"YOU LIAR!"

This voice rang inside his ears again.

Oh damn. Is she the one you can't let go of in your heart!?

That girl, Aoi Saotome, walked towards Koremitsu and stopped in front of him.

Koremitsu intended to explain things first, but she interposed first.

"I refuse."

A voice fraught with disgust filled the room, denying him.

I haven't even said anything here!

Aoi again emphasized with a forceful tone.

"I refuse. I refuse anything you say! I don't like men, and I don't want to say anything to you here!"

After that, she bit her delicate lips and turned her back.

What in the world is with this woman?

At this point, Koremitsu was speechless instead of being infuriated. There was no way out; he could not back away from here even if it was for the sake of his life .

"Wait! Actually it's about Mika- Hikaru..."

He wanted her attention, but unexpectedly, the flowing black hair flourished as she swung away.

"I-I-I-I-I- I really hate everything about that person! I felt... tainted the moment I heard his name!"

She seemed ready to kill with her eyes as she growled, slamming the classroom door right in front of a completely disconcerted Koremitsu.

"…Oi."

Koremitsu was shut out, quietly whispering to Hikaru.

"What's going on…aren't you two dating or something?"

Hikaru, floating behind Koremitsu the entire time, gave a bitter smile.

"Instead of saying that we're dating, I would say that…we're betrothed."

Betrothed!

This might happen in the Heian Era, but High School students are being betrothed in the modern day - the Heisei Japanese Era!? Well, I suppose that's normal among the rich.

Koremitsu looked again at Hikaru, who responded with a cool expression.

"Miss Aoi had always been upset with me, saying things like 'You're a useless harem prince', and 'You're a guy in love who switches partners every day.' Well, I don't have any male friends, so I had been playing with girls since I was young. I would not refuse any request that came my way, and I would happily accept gifts if a girl had any good intentions. Whenever I see a pretty lady, I think it would be impolite of me if I don't try to strike up a conversation with her; and when I see a cute girl, I'll definitely go to her and tell her that she's cute."

"I can't sleep when I'm alone as I'm scared of loneliness, and I can only relax when someone accompanies me. Right! Women are like flowers, and I think it's a man's responsibility to blossom their beauty! This is something that surpasses the exalted Law of Nature, something equivalent to the principles of religion-- uh, huh? Koremitsu? Why are you holding your head? It looks like the veins are popping from your temples. Are you listening to me? In other words, my passionate love for the existence known as female is like my passionate affection for flowers __"

That's enough. Don't continue any further! Don't talk about exalting or surpassing with such a serious look!

Koremitsu yelled in his heart, only more convinced that this person was really a playboy.

He probably tried to sweet-talk girls to gain their affections before, just like how he did so this morning. If his fiancée had witnessed it, she would definitely have called him out for cheating on her. There were only women at his funeral, so it was to be expected that she would give him an ear lashing.

To think that he could call her his 'girlfriend' unabashedly.

"…Can we end this partnership, **Mikado**?"

Stunned, Hikaru answered in turn.

"But Koremitsu!"

Hikaru pleaded.

At this point, Koremitsu could only think of breaking away from Hikaru and returning home.

Koremitsu was fooled by Hikaru's claims of having no friends at all. He, who could only eat alone at lunch, was different from Hikaru, who definitely had companionship to enjoy. Hikaru would be surrounded by girls, some of them even waiting to serve him their hand-made lunches.

There was no reason for Koremitsu to help this Casanova.

But if he did not help Hikaru move into the afterlife, Hikaru would be watching him whenever he went to the toilet, and when he might be bathing, sleeping or doing anything at all.

Koremitsu could not take this shameful play if it kept going. He was already viewed as a delinquent and avoided at all costs by fellow students, so he would be unable to take it if someone called him a possessed man who often spoke into the air.

As expected, he had to fulfill Hikaru's wish as soon as possible.

Tch, never mind!

Koremitsu endured the unhappiness in his heart as he opened the arts room door again.

"Aoi Saotome. I—understand your feelings very well! Your fiancé Hikaru continued to fool around with other girls, and he's the worst worthless harem bastard, but-"

Aoi came over and slammed the door shut again.

Koremitsu was not dejected, however, opening the door for another go.

"But—Mi, Hikaru always had a thought for you in his heart, and he let me, as a f-fr-fri-friend—"

SLAM!

The door was shut again.

The next moment he opened the door,

"Finish off what still needs to be done!"

"THAT'S ENOUGH!"

BAM!

Again, he tried. However, this time, there was a click from the other side of the door as it locked.

Damn it. The door's locked from within.

"No! I still have a duty to pass on Hikaru's words to you!"

Koremitsu yelled to the other side, hitting the barrier between them.

"I'll reject any religious advice here."

It elicited harsh reception from the halls.

"LISTEN UP, AOI SAOTOME!"

The moment he yelled, the door opened…

Splash!

Colored water was thrown onto him.

"I don't want to hear anything about you or Hikaru. I don't want to listen to anything involving men - especially anything that

involves Hikaru! If I had to choose between hearing about Hikaru and a slug soup, I'd rather have the latter!”

Hikaru, who was beside them, clutched at his chest after taking this searing hit.

The door was slammed shut and locked again.

Koremitsu was dripping with dirty water from head to toe.

Are you kidding me…?

Flabbergasted, it took a moment for the full weight of everything to occur to him.

“That’s why I say women--!”

Miss Aoi is a pure princess.

Hikaru had been shielding his fiancée.

As her name suggests, impure things cannot approach a pure white Hollyhock.

Once he reached home, Koremitsu dipped himself in the bathtub, his eyes fixed upon the ceiling.

He was not in a stupor or anything of the like. He stared at the ceiling because Hikaru, still dressed in school uniform, was floating up there, surrounded by steam.

"Hollyhocks are flowers that bloom in midsummer. When there's enough ventilation and sunlight, the green stems will grow straight and produce creamy pink flowers. They're cute, but I find that white flowers suit Miss Aoi much better; they were ostensibly brought back from the Holy Land by the Crusades. A flower that blooms in the Holy Land is perfect for Miss Aoi."

He continued to prattle on, and it was impossible to tell if he was either defending Aoi or promoting himself as a gardening representative.

Why is it that I have to listen to a guy's speech when bathing…?

"I don't want to listen to anything involving men - especially anything that involves Hikaru!"

Koremitsu grew depressed thinking about the fiery angst in Aoi 's voice as she yelled. He was dealing with a princess who showed her disgust and opposition right from the get-go.

Hikaru's wish seemed like it could never be fulfilled.

Will I end up as some delinquent haunted by a ghost for the rest of my life?

He felt that he should not have gone to the funeral.

If he could talk to his past self, Koremitsu would advise turning home from the funeral, lest he suffer more than he already was.

Besides, wouldn't it be that I'm not the one? Won't it be better for him to possess someone else?

It would be preferable if Hikaru chose a friendly and disciplined student. As Koremitsu saw things, Aoi would not have been so wary of this other person, and would have accepted the gifts without any hassle.

There would be a stark contrast made from the fierce-looking delinquent known as 'The Wild Beast's Roar' trying to approach her.

"I can only ask you for this favor, Mr Akagi."

"I don't have any real friends…"

He recalled the look Hikaru gave him in that earnest plea, and an inexplicable sense of responsibility came over him. A faint ache reached his heart.

"This is very important, a very important promise."

Well, you said it there. Ugh - can't you stick onto someone else? Do I really have to do this? Guh...

He leaned his face against the bathtub, muttering. Hikaru, who had finally closed on his Hollyhocks talk, spoke to him with a meek expression.

"*Koremitsu, I just realized something.*"

Don't tell me you have a brilliant plan to win over Aoi's heart, even as she's starting to hate men more and more by the day?

Koremitsu looked up with anticipation, but what he saw was Hikaru dressed in a purple tuxedo as if he was in the Takarazuka Revue [6].

"Wha--!"

Koremitsu fell backwards at the sight, Hikaru following through with pride.

"I can change my clothes using my imagination. See, this is good too, right? This one's also great."

He proceeded to swap clothes, switching between tennis clothes , jockey attire, casual outdoor clothing, clothes befitting of a bespectacled elite salary man, and so on.

Hikaru made no reservations with his experimenting.

"Hey, this suits me most, right? I always wanted to try this out at least once."

He even ended up in full Japanese Court Dress regalia. [7].

"Hey, which do you think is the nicest one? It's this one, right? Ah, I really want to take a photo, but I guess I won't be shown. I can't see myself on the mirror, which is really inconvenient. I can't even see my own face."

Hikaru sighed with regret.

Koremitsu really wanted to splash water on him, but held back knowing the water would just pass through.

Instead, he buried his head and shrugged his shoulders to show his frustration, bitterly speaking to Hikaru.

"You... bastard... whose sake do you think I'm suffering for!? Don't do some fashion show so carefreely over there!"

Hikaru realized that he was in the wrong and felt ashamed of it.

He swooped down in front of Koremitsu, closed his shoulders, and got into Seiza position again (even so, his knees did not touch the floor at all).

"Well, yes, I'm reflecting on it. I was too excited before…and I've been troubled over having to rely on you all this time, Koremitsu. I tried everything I could to help - supernatural things like using telekinesis to move objects and possess animals, or to possess your body and talk to Miss Aoi directly."

"Whoa, don't enter my body now. I'll get goosebumps."

"Don't worry, I didn't succeed."

"Is that so?"

Koremitsu heaved a sigh of relief.

"In that end, I could only change my clothing."

That isn't useful at all, you know.

"By the way, how should we move forward? Your fiancée finds your name impure because you'd been fooling around with girls back when you were still alive, and she's rejecting us."

"Hm, Miss Aoi is a serious person, but this is a cute point about her. It looks like we can only open her heart slowly until she's willing to listen to us."

"Uwa-! You want me to open her heart!? Why is it that I have to try getting into a woman's favor? And you're calling her cute? Are you out of your mind!?"

"Please do it! You're the only one who can hear my voice, Koremitsu. If you're able to beat an army of delinquents, you'll definitely be able to open Miss Aoi's heart."

"I said before that this has got nothing to do with delinquents! Don't look at me so expectantly! Besides, I couldn't get along with women, kids and animals at all ever since childhood. My standing around alone and breathing is enough for those guys to hate me."

"Leaving aside women and children, what about the animals? Didn't you say that you were in charge of taking care of them when you were young?

The Heian Era-styled Hikaru held onto a fan and covered his mouth, and the crown with long cloth attached tilted sidelong with his head.

"Erm- yeah…I took care of the turkeys and the rabbits in elementary school, but they never approached me during the 6 years I dutifully fed them and cleaned their huts. Whenever I stepped into that rabbit hut, they would panic and run into a corner to hide, leaning on each other and trembling. The turkeys would also cringe whenever I looked in…"

Koremitsu recalled his past with gloom written on his face, Hikaru's face showed a forced smile in return.

"Is- is that so?"

He changed the defeated tone in his voice to recover himself.

"But that's still amazing! You still took care of them even though they were afraid! Not just anyone can do that. You're like a modern-day Buddha to be able to put in all your effort despite the stereotypes thrown onto you!"

"I can't bring myself to be happy with that kind of follow-up."

"That's why, when dealing with Miss Aoi, please use that compassionate attitude to fight again. It's alright, Miss Aoi is very elegant. No matter how much she hates you, she won't kick at you. The bucket's too heavy, so she can't use that to splash water on you; she had to use palette before instead."

He continued with what could not even amount to an argument .

"Speaking of which, aren't you a harem king beloved by everyone here? You're an expert at luring in girls and understanding their hearts anyway. Don't you have any useful suggestion here?"

"What expert do you mean? I'm not a host. Also, my methods may be too tough for you."

Hikaru stared at Koremitsu, seeming to have a difficulty articulating what he meant by that.

"Never mind. Let's try it."

"Really?"

Despite offering, Hikaru was not enthusiastic.

"Anyway, try smiling."

"Huh?"

"What I mean is that you show the 'I have an interest in you, too' look . Try smiling like me."

Smiles

Hikaru gave a smile as gentle as the breeze.

It was a really cheerful smile - dazzling. That emotive feel the corners of his eyes seemed to display not to be forgotten.

"Woah…I think my heart just fluttered!"

Despite the other person being a guy.

"If that can't work, try closing your eyes softly and saying 'I don't feel like going home today' with a lonely look."

Hikaru closed his eyes.

Effortlessly, he transitioned into a tragic expression. A fuzzy feeling that would encourage anyone to protect him wholeheartedly washed over Koremitsu.

"Woah…now I'm really captivated by that."

This guy's really amazing! As expected of the harem prince! No wonder everyone at his funeral were girls!

He thought these words to himself; words that would devastate Hikaru if said aloud.

"Alright, let me try this."

Koremitsu rose from the tub optimistically, facing the mirror with a 'smile.'

"Eh? What is it? Koremitsu?"

"Well, I can't move my face muscles."

How could this happen? He had gone long days without smiling at all in the past, and through this time, his facial muscles grew weak.

No. Thinking about it, Koremitsu realized that his baby and kindergarten entrance photos all showed him giving hideous looks , his eyes glaring like they were about to attack the camera.

Is that so? So I'm not good at smiling, huh?

But it was not in his nature to retreat before the battle began. He forcefully lifted the ends of his lips and tried flashing a 'smile'.

The mirror reflected the devastating sight of a savage-looking boy, his facial muscles twitching. If a few blood stains were added onto the face, it was likely that any girl would faint upon seeing it.

Even Koremitsu was horrified by the look of that menacing person in the mirror. It was chilling even in spite of the fact that he was his own bathroom.

"Ugh - not giving up yet!"

He flared his nostrils and gritted his teeth to try again, but the harder he tried the more he could only see his reflection becoming increasingly horrendous.

"We-- well, Koremitsu, you shouldn't force yourself there."

Koremitsu turned to Hikaru, his hands still pulling his face.

"Ah--a-a-and then, I think it's better for you to have a serious expression than a smile given your personality, Koremitsu. You see, you're really manly, unlike this tender me!"

"Is that so?"

"Yeah! I think you're really suited to act in those cold-blooded acting roles or those V-cinema films[8]! Men really admire that stuff."

Hikaru tried his best to enliven the mood.

"Yeah. I guess it's true that it's unmanly to start smiling foolishly when there's nothing funny."

Koremitsu pulled himself through.

"Then, I'll try to look bitter and lonely…"

He tried to show the "I don't want to go home tonight" expression.

He closed his eyes and lowered his shoulders.

However, as he glanced up and eyed himself in the mirror, he found that there was a man looking back at him with black aura and vengeful attitude.

Instead of a "I don't want to go home tonight" vibe, he was giving off a "Let's start the hell's banquet tonight" kind of vibe.

I'm really…

Koremitsu was dejected in front of the mirror.

"Actually, you look best when you're naturally Koremitsu! I think you already have enough charm yourself!"

"I don't need you to comfort me!"

Koremitsu lifted his head of red hair and shouted angrily.

"It's impossible for someone like me to open a girl's heart when no nearby female dog, cat, ferret or hamster will even approach me ! I'll be haunted by a perverted prince in costume floating over my head even when I bathe!"

"Don't be like this! Don't give up on yourself like that! If you're unhappy about me wearing clothes, I'll take them off. You see?"

Before he finished his words, the Heian-era noble clothes immediately vanished. Hikaru appeared nude as he floated about the rising steam.

Suddenly, this naked male had appeared before Koremitsu's eyes.

"UWAAAA—!!"

He reeled back in shock, and this momentum caused his head to slam into the wall. He then slipped in all his confusion, landing with his body sprawled and facing up.

The glass door of the bathroom slid open, and there was Koharu , dressed in a flimsy pinafore, standing with her sleeves rolled up as she growled.

“Koremitsu! What are you doing alone in here!?”

“So-sorry!”

Koremitsu apologized, and at the same time, felt it was a good thing that Koharu could not see Hikaru.

That was because a stark naked Hikaru was floating in front of her, his mouth still showing no signs of stopping.

“Your older sister is either the Trifoliate Orange-type or the Mandrake-type. She’s really amazing.”

“Idiot, she’s not my older sister. She’s my aunt, divorced once, and is a 36-year-old hag.”

Koremitsu slipped out these words reflexively. Koharu returned them with a beating.

The next morning, Koremitsu found his bento placed on the chabudai.

He thought that it was to make up for the excessive beating from the previous day, and brought it to school. When he opened

the lunch box during break, he found that it was filled with red bean paste.

"She wants a fight with me!? That 36 year old!?'

"Amaazing…it's really red bean paste. That doesn't seem appetizing at all."

Hikaru muttered as he floated above. He was dressed in the white suit and black pants of the school uniform.

"Damn it."

Koremitsu stuffed the bento box back into his bag and walked out of the classroom.

"Where are you going?"

"To the snack shop. I can't possibly have red bean paste for lunch."

He headed off to the snack shop located at the end of the second level.

However, he arrived a little too late as there remained only a slice of yakisoba bread, a piece of jam bread, a chocolate roll and a slice of sugar toast available.

Koremitsu did not like to eat sweet things. To him, the bread with jam and chocolate roll were evil.

Thus, he could only choose the yakisoba bread.

Well, I guess it's good that there's still yakisoba bread left, rather than having nothing to eat…

With a gloomy look on his face, he reached his hand forward.

"!"

Simultaneously, another hand reached in from the other side, also grabbing the yakisoba bread.

This is bad. My lunch is doomed if I can't buy this.

Koremitsu immediately looked in their direction with his trademark glare.

In the face of his savage expression and hideous stare, any ordinary person would have crumbled on the spot. A devilish aura seemed to glow behind his slightly arched back.

However, the other person grabbing the yakisoba bread was someone Koremitsu knew.

The fierce-looking girl beside me in class!

This person next to him shared a shocked expression with Koremitsu. However, it quickly changed into an antagonistic stare.

She raised her eyebrows, her eyes burning like flames as she glared back at Koremitsu.

It was unbelievable to think that in the face of this person known to others as 'The Hellhound,' there was a girl who still kept her fighting will.

However, he would definitely not hand over the yakisoba bread to her.

"Ugh~"

"Uuu~"

The two of them were like wild animals that had just met their natural enemies, as each of their expressions, tense lips and quaking brows were trying to scare the other off.

"~~Uu (Hey, let go of it. That's my prey.)"

"Uuu~ (No way. I touched it first!)"

Neither would back down as they argued intensely.

In the midst of the silence now between them, sparks flew.

What should I do?

In terms of strength, he definitely would not lose to a girl.

However, if he were to pull the bread by brute force alone, he may end up ripping the plastic packaging, and the bread may end

up dropping onto the floor. If he tried pulling with a firmer grip, he would end up pinching the bread.

Got to think of a plan here...!

"Koremitsu, you're dealing with a girl here. Just give her the bread! Ladies first!"

Behind him, Hikaru spoke in amazement.

"No way! Even though she's a woman, I won't hand over my lunch to her!"

He let these words slip and showed an opening in his regret for saying them. The fiendish girl proceeded to kick Koremitsu in the knee.

It was a brilliant kick, one encompassing the perfect harmony of speed, timing and power perfectly.

"Uooh."

Koremitsu lost his footing, and the bread slipped from his hand.

"Wah, Koremitsu!"

The enemy took the bread mercilessly.

"Ack! You—"

Koremitsu looked over and found that she had already paid for and kept the yakisoba bread for herself.

"Despicable!"

She took the bread, turned around leisurely, and looked over at the enraged Koremitsu.

Her glossy, light beige hair swayed.

"It's your fault for taking me lightly **as a girl**."

She spoke with an icy tone, seemingly mocking him, and took the yakisoba bread and a cup of latte coffee before promptly leaving.

Koremitsu watched her long, slender legs in a short skirt disappear gradually from his field of vision.

"Ugh, why is she so violent!? I let her get what she wanted."

"*Yeah, those are nice looking legs.*"

Nothing was left on the counter for Koremitsu's lunch.

"Why is the other stuff sold out already!?"

He yelled as he rattled the empty cases, frightening the bread shop lady.

"Damn it - that girl... I hope she becomes afflicted with a cellphone-reliant disease and sends so many messages that she develops tenosynovitis until her fingers drop off."

Koremitsu, who was on the rooftop meant to be prohibited, ate his lunch of red bean paste, milk, vegetable juice, sports drink and vitamin water as he continued to lament away regarding the injustice he just suffered.

"That's enough already. Isn't it, Koremitsu? She's a girl, after all. A delinquent like you will be hated by others, you know."

"I'm not a delinquent."

"If you want to deny it, you have keep your actions in check."

Hikaru's chastising started to cause Koremitsu a migraine. Before now, the only one who complained was Koremitsu about Hikaru's own mannerisms.

What in the world? Why is he acting all mature all of a sudden?

He remembered that when Hikaru was arguing with him in front of the shoe locker, he claimed that he "couldn't leave a crying girl alone," showing a stern expression.

In fact, this guy's very gentle with girls. Is this the definition of a gentleman? Well, maybe it's an overstatement, but I do feel unhappy that it's somewhat true.

"Shut...shut up."

"Also, the one sitting beside you in class is Miss Shikibu. You should get along better with others."

"She's named Shikibu? How do you know her name?"

"Really, Koremitsu, how can you not know the name of the girl sitting beside you? And she's so pretty too; she has such cute eyebrows, and she's a really attractive girl. Regarding this Miss Honoka Shikibu, she's a rather popular person."

"Huh? That cold-hearted girl who keeps sending messages?'

Koremitsu once thought that since she gave such a fierce look as she sent messages, throwing off an ominous presence, she was definitely the type of person to be isolated by the others in class.

"Miss Shikibu's not only popular with the boys. There are quite a lot of female fans out there, too. She's athletic, often helps others, and has a very keen sense of chivalry. She's someone the girls really admire."

Chivalry!?

As in, being helpful to others!?

"I don't know. I don't know what those people think at all!"

"Even if you look away and deny it…don't you find that Miss Shikibu has very nice looking legs!?"

"AND YOU'RE TELLING ME THAT THE WEAPON USED TO KICK ME IS ATTRACTIVE!?"

“That feisty expression of hers really entranced me."

"I just find it disgusting."

"Her hair's an alluringly smooth, tan color."

"How is that squirrel-like color nice to look at?"

"...I say, Koremitsu, aren't you being too picky with girls?"

"Yeah. Gramps has always been telling me not to be too kind to girls."

Hikaru sighed, continuing.

"There's nothing more beautiful and cute than girls in this world. They're gentle, yet hardy."

The insistence carried in saying this was something Koremitsu felt he could never understand in all his life, and he wanted it to remain that way.

Women were an existence foreign to Koremitsu, as he would eye them with gloomy pupils at times - they in all their inexplicable fragility before him.

"If only you could understand the beauty of girls."

Hikaru muttered in a sad tone, quickly changing his voice to be cheerful again.

"Okay, how about you try dating a girl? Let's go a find a girl who can make your heart race. I'll demonstrate to you. Then, let's call in two girls and go out as a group of four. It'll be fun!"

"Aren't you already dead?"

"Ah, yeah."

"Seriously, this is something important, okay? I see you forgot that you're a ghost with his funeral rites done."

Hikaru let out a snicker.

"It's definitely your fault."

"HUH!?"

Almost in complete disregard of Koremitsu's outburst, Hikaru spoke gently in a register that seemed to bleed a wonderful fragrance with each word.

"Because you were able to hear my voice, and you could talk with me. It feels like I made a friend. We can go to school and return from school together, we can go to each other's home - we can even chat with one another during class breaks or lunch break."

Koremitsu's head started to feel hot.

What in the world is this guy saying?

Koremitsu's heart started to waver for some ridiculous reason, and he was caught in confusion.

Is- is that so?... Is this what going to school, returning from school, and having lunch with a 'friend' means? I see, so that's how it is.

He mused what Hikaru said.

His face felt like it was in sweltering heat.

His chest began to itch so much, it was nearly unbearable.

"We aren't exactly real friends, but just 'designated' as such, right?"

As he spoke, he deliberately averted his eyes from Hikaru. The latter remained calm in reply.

"...Well, yeah. We're just 'temporary' friends until we give Miss Aoi her gifts."

Koremitsu realized that he may have hurt Hikaru's feelings when he said they were only 'designated' as friends. His heart ached at the thought with an abnormally strong sense of loneliness .

"Oh, so I'll just help you complete your wish and let you ascend to heaven! I really can't stand it whenever you start to explain things related to flowers. Speaking of which, flowers wilt very easily, and they can snap easily; they can be crushed easily, can't be eaten, and serve no other purpose whatsoever."

Koremitsu did not know what to do about this inexplicable loneliness inside him, his voice gruffer than before.

There was no reason for him to mention flowers.

Hikaru was still as optimistic as ever.

"Ah, yet there are edible flowers, like dandelion, violets, roses, and more. They taste rather good as well. Oh yes, let's invite girls to pick some grass next time."

Koremitsu, trying to contain his unease until this point in time, could only show bewilderment in his eyes upon hearing Hikaru's proposal.

Picking grass?

Hikaru started to explain excitedly.

"In other words, let's go pick edible grass in the wild next time. Those girls who like to go outdoors to the hills and forests are really cute, and we can increase our intimacy with others as we make food. Also, it can satisfy your desire for food, you know? Ah, but I feel that girls prefer to have someone giving them the flowers instead of enjoying them. If you pick a simple flower that can only bloom in the wild, her affection for you will increase greatly!"

Koremitsu tried to picture the scene in his mind.

"You see! There are dandelions everywhere! Let's have dandelion tempura and boiled dandelion for dinner tonight!"

On some verdant grassland, Hikaru held dandelions in both hands, a radiant smile on his face.

For reasons unknown, there was Yodel music in the background.

He was surrounded by a hoard of unfamiliar girls.

"Kya! You're amazing, Hikaru!"

"I want to try out your cooking, Hikaru!"

They were jumping about and cheering with delight.

"—For example, a crown made from dandelions or White Clovers will be very effective. For a hardy boy like you, people will like it if you can make a flower crown clumsily. She will definitely feel very touched. Even if it's only a flower, you can put it on the ring finger. That would be equally effective. I'll teach you how to do it; it's very simple, and I'm sure you'll agree, Koremitsu—"

"Didn't I tell you not to talk to me about flowers and women already, you harem prince!?"

Koremitsu's harsh words were a thin veil over the regret he had for his insensitivity with Hikaru. The pain in his heart lingered, but heavy atmosphere was lifted with Hikaru's suggestion.

As expected, this guy's just a carefree harem bastard!

Hikaru shrugged his shoulders, feigning resignation.

"Looks like I failed."

"Anyway, now's not the time to try and hook up girls, but to seriously think about how you can pass your feelings on to your fiancée. Your fiancée is rather tough to deal with. The gifts you want to present her aren't the sort that can be stuffed into a shoe locker, after all."

This was the most troublesome thing for Koremitsu.

Hikaru promised to give Aoi six different presents on her birthday, but they were not things that could be bought in a shop and given to others so easily with a "Hi, please accept this."

In order to make her accept all these presents, the notorious Koremitsu Akagi had to act as the messenger for Hikaru Mikado and make Aoi accept these presents willfully.

Can I really do this?

We're just 'temporary' friends after all.

Koremitsu frowned with a groan, Hikaru speaking up.

"Ah, I just forgot something very simple."

"Huh?"

"Only Miss Aoi and I know about my promise to give seven presents to her."

"Oh."

"In other words, if you tell her this, it proves that you're my representative, and she may actually open her heart to you."

"Ohh - this sort of thinking certainly can work!"

Koremitsu poked his body out.

"You should have said that right from the beginning, you bastard. Now we have some progress."

"Ahaha, I was really absent-minded."

"Looks like my days of going to the toilet and bathing alone are just over the horizon!"

Under the cerulean sky, they both held each other's tender hands like genuine friends (even though it was impossible), and they took the moment to savor their happiness.

Lunch break ended, and once Honoka Shikibu could catch the sight of Koremitsu on his way from the roof toward the classroom, she glanced over with a wrathful expression.

Koremitsu also remembered his own grudge of having his yakisoba bread taken away, and intended to glare back; but the hope that he could still resolve the situation regarding Aoi prevented him from doing so.

Humph. I'm not some petty guy who sweats the details.

He chose to ignore her.

The school day came to an end. Koremitsu stood from his chair and headed off to the arts room on the 3rd level to fulfill his responsibility as Hikaru's messenger.

"Huh? Nobody's around."

"It looks like we're a little early."

There was no one in the classroom - only a stone plaster for design looked back at them. The canvas and easels were lying in a corner.

"This is…Miss Aoi's painting."

Hikaru floated to a canvas piece and smiled.

Koremitsu, too, walked over and took a peek.

"Eh- that's unexpectedly…well-drawn."

He was not simply complimenting her for the sake thereof, but was truly enchanted by it.

It was a painting of the school's staircase drawn from the bottom stair and looking upwards. The painting was made to look like it was shrouded in a layer of golden mist, covered along with a splendid mix of calming hue.

Rays of light that shone in from the top of the stairs were warm, and one could not help but close his eyes and feel their embrace. However, there was a sense of loneliness in how this scenery had no one in it.

Is this gentle and slightly lonely painting that cynical girl's…?

"Miss Aoi is very good at painting backgrounds, whether it's the stairs, the school's shoe locker, the corridor, the book racks in the library , the stage of an empty gym, the water cooler in school—she's always able to use soft colors and depict the minor details ordinary people don't normally notice."

Hikaru looked like he was the one who painted the piece of art as he proudly smiled.

Gazing upon the painting, his eyes were intense - like they were protecting treasure - and were filled with what seemed a medley of powerful emotions. Sunlight danced off of particles in the air all around an open window, where they fluttered as Hikaru stood.

This guy's an unrepentant playboy, but his feelings for Aoi are real…

Even Koremitsu, who was slow-witted in matters of romance, could understand a little of what Hikaru felt as he examined Aoi's painting.

He, who was unwilling to help Hikaru before - only hoping to send him to Heaven - after seeing Hikaru's sincere affection for his girlfriend, truly wanted to pass Hikaru's feelings on to her.

I'm just your 'temporary' friend for now… but I ended up accepting your plea because of fate. I'll definitely help you present your gifts to Aoi. I'll definitely express to her your feelings.

He said this to himself as a commitment.

"What are you doing?"

A tense voice came from behind.

A pale-faced Aoi was standing in the doorway. She frowned slightly, biting her lips in anger.

"Please get out."

Her slender shoulders trembled. Perhaps she was fearful of Koremitsu's appearance.

"Miss Aoi, please listen to Koremitsu."

Hikaru said this, ostensibly to try calming her down.

His voice could not reach Aoi's ears.

"As I'd said yesterday, I don't want to talk to you in any way."

Koremitsu looked over to Hikaru with an expression that said " Leave it to me." He stiffened his facial muscles, gave the most serious expression he could muster, and walked towards Aoi.

Aoi not alone in her shock with this.

"I haven't presented Hikaru's second gift to you."

Upon hearing this, Aoi's body convulsed. Her eyes betrayed surprise. She was, without a doubt, rattled that Koremitsu referenced something only she and Hikaru could know.

Alright, it looks like I got her attention.

He glanced aside at Hikaru, who had been watching them tensely and giving a thumbs up, indicating that things were proceeding smoothly enough.

"Hikaru promised to give you seven gifts, and the remaining six are with me for the time being. I hope to give them to you on your birthday, so on that day, please—"

Suddenly, a bag was thrown at him.

As Hikaru called out, "*Miss Aoi*, *please stop!*" the bag hit Koremitsu square in the face.

"What- what in the world?"

Aoi looked like a cat with its hairs standing as she panted in heaves and glared at Koremitsu.

She was livid.

Her fists were now trembling more than before the moment Koremitsu spoke. She was biting her lips harder, and her eyebrows were lower.

Before Koremitsu could understand what was going on, she threw everything from paint brushes to wash pails to drawing pencils.

"Please don't make such a lie! Why would Hikaru ask you such a thing before he died!? He died from an accident!"

Argh, I forgot about this.

The moment Hikaru gave Aoi her first present, he was unable to know that he was about to die.

"Miss Aoi. Koremitsu heard from me that I intended to give seven presents to a very important girl, and he decided to help me in order to fulfill this mission!"

Hikaru continued to explain as he stood beside them.

"Tha-that's right! I'm Hikaru's - friend! I heard about the seven gifts before—that he wanted to hand those gifts to a very important girl!"

He shouted as he dodged the brushes and pencils. As he was too anxious, he ended up saying things without order.

"You first entered school the day right before Golden Week. Asa said that you only appeared once in school before Hikaru's death, and that you can't possibly be Hikaru's friend. She said that you intended to lie to me; she said that your words are all lies, and that I shouldn't listen to you."

Who's Asa? Oi!?

"Miss Aoi. Please calm down. I've been close friends with Koremitsu for a long time."

"That's right! I've been sworn brothers with Hikaru for ten years already."

"Hikaru never had any male friends ever since kindergarten! All his playmates were female! That's what Asa said too! Hikaru can't possibly have any male friends!"

Then again, who's this Asa anyway!?

There were red, blue, black, and green paints tubes thrown right at him. Aoi, who was panting erratically on a canvas now, gritted her teeth as her eyes became hot flames.

"If what you said was even the slightest bit true, that means that Hikaru told others of the promise he had with me. He definitely leaked it out during a pillow talk with another woman, and that woman told others out of excitement, only for you to hear it."

"That's not true, Miss Aoi!"

Hikaru grew desperate.

Aoi lost control of her emotions. No matter how they tried to deny her accusations, she would refuse to hear them out.

"GET OUT! PLEASE GET OUT! PLEASE DON'T TREAT ME LIKE AN IDIOT! EVEN IF ASA NEVER SAID SO, I WON'T FORGIVE A DESPICABLE PERSON LIKE YOU!"

Aoi continued on the assault, looking like she would even throw the canvas and easels over.

"This won't do, Koremitsu. Let's try again another day."

"I say, **Mikado**. You aren't really trustworthy, aren't you?"

"Please go!"

Koremitsu raised his bag face to block the projectiles thrown at him on his escape. Aoi did not cease until Koremitsu was out the door. He then opened it again.

"I'll come back!"

He yelled as he poked his face out from behind the bag, and a palette hit his chin, knocking him back.

"Woah!"

He slipped and tried to regain his balance, but ultimately failed as he fell onto the floor in the halls.

"KYAA!"

There was a high-pitched voice, and Koremitsu's nose picked up something sweet, his face buried in something soft.

Hm? What is it? Why are there cushions on the floor?

"This, this is bad, Koremitsu! Even I've never done such a thing in the school corridors before!"

Why is Hikaru so anxious?

At the next moment,

"YOU PERVERT!"

He was hit hard in the chest.

He lifted his head and found Honoka Shikibu's face inches away. Her face was flushed red, and her murderous expression looked right back at him.

Shikibu's breasts were right below Koremitsu's face, confirmation that the cushion-like thing from before was Shikibu's

cleavage. The worst part was that Honoka's knee pressed into his abdomen.

A more forceful impact came. Shikibu clenched her fist and hooked it from the right side into Koremitsu's forehead.

"GUAH!"

Koremitsu rolled off her.

"PERVERT! MOLESTER! GO DIE!"

Shikibu proceeded to kick at Koremitsu's shoulders and abdomen with her heels and toes.

Koremitsu cried in anguish as he took her kickboxer-like hits.

"Miss Shikibu, you're mistaken! This was an accident!"

Hikaru tried his best to explain, but, as had already been proven once that day, his explanations were futile.

Shikibu gave a scornful gaze down at the walloped Koremitsu, who laid motionless in his disheveled uniform.

"If you dare to push down another girl in school and bury your head in her breasts again, I'll beat you up good!"

With this declaration, she walked off.

A crowd formed around Koremitsu as onlookers started their exchanges over the fight.

"Shikibu's so cool."

"The delinquent sure has it rough."

Aoi, who was standing at the door, had her input also.

"…It's just like what Asa said. You're the worst."

She muttered it coldly, slamming the door shut.

Amid the strewn textbooks and stationery, Koremitsu sprawled on the floor.

Damn iiiit!!! Didn't I crash into Shikibu's breasts because of the palette you threw at me!? And that Asa or whatever definitely hates my guts, right!?

He vociferated in his mind.

A voice beside him rang louder than the others.

"Koremitsu! Hang in there, Koremitsu! Don't die off too!"

Hikaru said some ominous things.

"As expected, women are no good. That fierce-looking girl kicked me without giving me a chance to explain, and that fiancée of yours just went crazy and threw all the brushes and paint at me! I'm not some shooting target, for goodness' sake—! That's why I say women—!"

Koremitsu sat down atop the tatami mat in his house, muttering his grandfather's catchphrase to vent his frustrations.

He still felt sore from the beating he'd received from Shikibu; his wounds were so bad that he'd nearly been hospitalized.

"Anyway…I'm really sorry about all of this."

Hikaru, carefree by nature, could only be seated and apologize to Koremitsu.

"For Miss Aoi to have deemed me so untrustworthy... It's not as though I'd never expected it, but I couldn't have imagined that it would be so serious... Has Miss Aoi taken my treatment of women to heart? But each flower has a charm of its own."

"Your reflection on this had better be as deep as the sea, you big pervert."

"Yes…"

Hikaru shrunk at his words.

"So what should we do now? She has treated you like a playboy who blabbered about this during a pillow talk with girls, and because of that, her defenses are even greater. Can we really open her heart before her birthday?"

"I forgot that Miss Aoi is different from the other girls."

Hikaru frowned dejectedly.

"I can't compose myself whenever I face Miss Aoi…even when I was alive, I did a lot more things to make her angry than to make her happy. Uu - I'm really a useless playboy."

"Don't say that you're a pretty boy, alright? Besides, we can't let this continue."

"We may need someone who understands a woman's heart to give suggestions."

Koremitsu was surprised by the usefulness of Hikaru's proposal .

"For example, we need a knowledgeable and gentle big sister, admired by all the underclassmen girls, someone everyone can talk to. Much like the flower of love from South America, Heliotrope - called purple fragrance in Japanese - a reliable woman with radiance, elegance and great knowledge."

"Women again!?"

Suddenly, they both heard a cheerful song.

"Wh-what is that?"

It was a hit song from some popular band. The lyrics of the female vocals were an encouragement for love. However, one had to ask why it sounded in the first place.

"Koremitsu, your phone's ringing."

Koremitsu did not remember setting this song as his ringtone. That aside, it was unbelievable for him to ever receive a message.

He rummaged through his bag and found the phone flashing.

The phone was lavender in color, decorated with sparkling accessories, and there was the keychain of an ugly bear, or whatever it was, dangling from it.

"This phone isn't mine."

"It seems that it belongs to a girl."

The phone continued ringing. *Shall I pick it up?*

He flipped the phone open, but he was unfamiliar with how it worked. He randomly pressed a few buttons, and the ringing stopped. Then, a message log appeared on the screen.

"To: Purple Princess: regarding the first date I had with Tomonori (>_<)"

"Purple princess?"

He continued to the other messages.

"Re: Purple Princess: I'm going to confess tomorrow~~"

"Purple Princess! Yuuki wants to talk to you regarding her ex-boyfriend!"

"Re: Purple Princess: I made up with K."

He scanned through the list, and found the name Purple Princess all over the place.

"Purple Princess? That's an idiotic name."

He commented, and Hikaru injected.

"I heard of it before. It's something the girls talk about between…well , wait, please let me recall. My memory increases tenfold as long as it has anything to do with girls. Oh yes, that was when I was walking back with the second year, Miss Reiko from Seibi Academy after we went to see the Renoir exhibition…"

He put his hand below his chin, and pondered for a while.

"Oh yes! She's a mobile novelist!"

"A mobile novel?"

"Yes, it's a sweet love story with lots of mood whiplash. Once she uploaded it onto the blog, there were a lot of replies asking for suggestions with love, and she's hailed as the 'expert in love'. Can your phone access the net, Koremitsu?"

"…I guess, but I never went online before."

"Then, let's try looking for this Purple Princess."

With Hikaru guiding him, Koremitsu used his phone to enter the name 'Purple Princess' as a search query.

The top search showed a blog called 'Purple Princess's Mansion '.

"That one."

Koremitsu clicked on it, and there was a dazzling, purple-based webpage with all sorts of functions on to boast.

There were a few sorted tabs that included 'novel', 'love talk', and 'diary'. He clicked on 'novel', and there appeared prose in many paragraphs and line breaks.

"The breath sighing from the raccoon

Descends upon my face.

Cold.

Spicy.

My heart aches

Not good.

It looks like I've really fallen in love."

"???"

A spicy breath? Heart ache? I don't understand at all. And speaking of which, this is a novel? Or is it a poem?

He tilted his head, clicking on the 'love talk' tab.

“Today, I’ll answer Miss Cactus Flower’s troubles!

This is the mail sent from Miss Cactus Flower!”

“Purple Princess, please listen to me.

I’m a first year high school girl who really loves K from my class.

K treats me as a mere friend and never treated me as a girl before.

K likes Y-bi, my clubmate, and he actually asked me to help him ask her if there's anyone she's going out with.

What exactly should I do here?”

After this question, there was the Purple Princess’ answer:

“Miss Cactus Flower!

You must definitely show your feelings to K.

I know you're scared of breaking your relationship with K, but it will feel even more unbearable if K goes out with another girl.

You should take action now!

To make your confession a success, this Purple Princess will give you some tips.

First, you have to let K know that you, Cactus Flower, are a girl. This is the most important thing!

Your hairstyle, jewelry, and makeup should all be a little girlish.

And then, if K asks you what's going on, you should look weak and answer feebly.

"There's someone I like, and I hope he notices me."

After that, K will probably wonder who the person you 'like' is."

Such questions and answers about love continued on the page.

Koremitsu looked at the phone.

"…Hey, the owner of this phone inside my bag is the 'Purple Princess,' right?"

"From the title of the mail, it certainly seems that way."

"I just got kicked badly by Shikibu in front of the arts room, right?"

"Yeah, her skirt was exposed quite a bit. Her pretty legs could be seen, and her thighs were in clear view."

"Once she went off, I stood up - the stuff in my bag dropped everywhere when I got up. I was embarrassed and furious, and anyway, I just picked up everything on the floor and put them into my bag…"

"Yeah."

Hikaru and Koremitsu looked at the phone with intrigue.

"Maybe Shikibu's phone…was inside there."

"That's a possibility."

"In other words, this phone…"

Koremitsu had a bad feeling as he spoke.

"Is Shikibu the Purple Princess?"

</noinclude>

Chapter 3 - Even Though Everyone Calls Me an Expert in Love

"Ah, really? Why isn't anyone picking up?"

Honoka Shikibu, inside her room, grew nervous as she held the phone to her ear.

She had already been on the bus heading home when she'd realized that her cellphone was missing. She was reaching for her phone to update her blog, as she normally did, but was met with only an empty skirt pocket.

She immediately returned to school and frantically searched its entirety: in classroom desks, in corridors, and everywhere else she had been. However, she could not find her cellphone.

She'd even asked those she knew who were still at school to make a call to her cellphone, but the only response that received was a notification the cell phone was either low on battery or out of range.

What shall I do? Nobody brought it to the staff room either. Did I drop it back then?

After school, someone had suddenly barged into her as she'd been walking along the corridor.

The culprit was that classmate who sat beside her in class, the red-haired delinquent with those savage-looking eyes. As though to add insult to injury, he'd buried his face in her chest! That perverted, idiotic bastard - Koremitsu Akagi!

Maybe he's still angry that I snatched the yakisoba bread from him during lunch break and made him hungry. The more she thought of it, the more she wanted to give him a few good kicks, and her skin grew agitated as though breaking into a rash.

The cell phone could have slipped out of her skirt pocket when she'd stomped on him earlier; it was the only possibility she could think of.

If someone were to pick it up and see its contents...

Her vision darkened and she felt as though her throat were being wrung out; her pulse quickened.

No~, anything but that!

She grabbed onto the receiver as she hung up and shook her head sideways in a contorted manner. Her bright tea-colored hair slapped her face.

It'll be alright. Someone kind may have picked it up and brought it over to the staff room. But, but what if someone unfavorable like Akagi pick it up and saw the contents…UWAAAHH, no, no, I mustn't think any further.

She wished to push this thought from her mind, but her stomach continued to hurt; she wasn't able to eat much of the sweet and sour pork she loved so much.

The day after, Honoka ran to the staff room in the early morning only to find her cellphone had yet to be returned, and she could do nothing but depart for her classroom.

"You don't look too well, Hono. Did something happen?"

Her good friend, the bespectacled class representative who wore her hair in small braids, asked worriedly,

"It…it's nothing."

She put her hand to her stomach and answered dazedly.

At this moment, Koremitsu Akagi walked in and sat adjacent to her silently.

Had her phone not disappeared, she would have attacked him with a barrage of insults like "pervert", "molester", and whatever else she could think of, but nothing came to mind. She did not want to show any signs of wavering and was about to shoot him a glare, but, for some reason, Koremitsu was already looking at her!

For a moment, Honoka's heart nearly ceased to beat.

"Geh!"

She hurriedly looked away.

Her chest was ringing like a morning bell.

Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-why is he looking at me!?

He looked at her with narrowed eyes, sealed lips, and furrowed eyebrows; his countenance showed his seriousness.

Her knees shook in fear and she dared not glance at Koremitsu thereafter.

Once Homeroom period ended, Koremitsu whispered to Honoka.

"Your precious thing is with me now. Come to the roof during class break."

"!"

Her heart nearly froze again.

Koremitsu said such, and fell silent once more.

That perverted delinquent and molester, Koremitsu Akagi, definitely read through the contents of her phone.

He definitely knew Honoka's secret.

During the break after first period, Koremitsu left the classroom .

Honoka left for the roof a minute after him, looking sick as a hospital patient.

He's planning to use the phone to blackmail and threaten me, I guess. That's the worst.

Exactly what sort of indulgent demands would he make?

Honoka felt extreme apprehension as she stumbled a few times, and her stomach ached as though something hard in her stomach was being kneaded. She opened to door to the roof and found Koremitsu standing there with his hands in his pockets.

His back was arched.

His messy red hair swayed with the breeze.

Once he noticed Honoka's arrival, he turned to face her. His sharp, vengeful seemed to challenge everything on this world as he scowled at Honoka.

No matter how one looked at him, they would see him as a delinquent, a dangerous person.

Honoka nearly fainted.

However, if she were to show him any signs of weakness, he would surely devour her, bones and all.

There was no way she could succumb to him.

She brushed her hair aside with one hand and returned Koremitsu's scowl with a glare.

"What do you want with me? I'm quite busy."

"This phone is yours, right?"

Koremitsu presented her the phone like the main character in Mito Kōmon[9] displaying his seal case.

Honoka's heart was pained.

"Th-th-tha-that's right."

She contemplated on whether she should smile and thank him, or whether she should resent him for not returning the phone earlier, during class.

Before she'd decided, Koremitsu said something which caught her off guard.

"Sorry, I accidentally saw it."

"!"

"The mail topic with the name Purple Princess on it."

"~~!"

"I read through this 'Purple Princess's Mansion'".

"So-so-so-so-so-so-so-so-so—"

She wanted to maintain her composure and ask "So what", but her tongue would not submit to her will.

Her body fluctuated in temperature, and she was unsure of whether her face was darkening or turning pale.

HE READ THROUGH THE BLOG!

In other words, he surfed through the mobile novels and the love talk.

"So you're the 'love expert' everyone talks about."

Koremitsu brought his face nearer to Honoka's.

Honoka was rooted to the ground.

Wha-what is he planning? This delinquent! Molester!

She truly considered kicking him off of the roof if he were to touch her.

Honoka raised herself into a defensive stance, and Koremitsu's lips curled into a frown. He raised his eyebrows and spoke with a serious bearing,

"First, that thing yesterday was an accident. I'm not a molester, and I'm not a pervert. Back to the real topic."

Real topic? Is he going to settle his debt with me?

She gulped.

"Please teach me how to persuade girls and open their hearts!"

The red-haired delinquent lowered his head, and Honoka could do nothing but gawk at him.

In fact, Honoka herself was not adept at dealing with men.

This was because, on a spring day during her first year of middle school, she met a senile voyeur.

Honoka was cheerfully walking home after school, and the sun had yet to set.

She caught sight of a man wearing shades and a coat, kneeling down by the roadside.

"Are you okay!?"

Startled, she went over to ask, but that man stood and opened his coat, exposing his stark-naked self and that erect thing down below.

Honoka screamed and ran off.

What?

What was that?

What was that disgusting thing down at the groin?

Are all men like that? Nooo! It's disgusting!

Ever since then, that scene would occasionally come to mind, and it was horrifying enough for her to scream.

There was a time when she would recall that pervert every time she looked at her male classmates' faces; her body would stiffen, and she would look away, acting natural, but wondering whether she would find love if she could not forget about that incident.

If she could not bring herself to like men, she would have to accept that she'd been defeated by that pervert.

Honoka was perturbed by this, and was prideful enough to not give way.

That's why, in order to best that pervert, she began to train at a kickboxing gym, learning techniques she could use were she to find herself in trouble, and she started writing love stories in an attempt to increase her tolerance to men.

At first, she went overboard with how unrealistic and sickeningly sweet the stories were, "This kind of thing definitely won't exist in reality! There's no way such men will say such cliché lines here." She would comment about them herself as she blushed and rolled around on the chair. As the days passed, her writing skills improved.

The numbers of readers increased with time, and at every update she would receive responses like, “This is really interesting. ” and “Natsuno’s love story’s really touching.” Such responses filled Honoka with joy, so she would submit stories with greater frequency. Someone left a comment on Honoka’s blog asking for help with love troubles, and once she responded to it, everyone else started sending in their own love questions.

Honoka had a “big sister” personality, and loved to help others settle their problems. She would answer all the questions put to her personally, and was unwittingly hailed as the “Love Expert”.

But, she had never dated a boy before.

“—Please.”

The delinquent was before her, his hands at his thighs as he bowed deeply.

“Please... be my heliotrope. Be my purple fragrance.”

Honoka was stunned by such sudden words, but the boy continued to plead with her, asking how he could open Aoi Saotome’s heart, and how he could woo girls.

Really, you’re a molester. Why are you asking me so seriously?

Cold sweat gradually rolled from her pores and down her temple.

What should I do now? It looks like he really believes that I'm the 'Love Expert'. Uh, I pretended to be the perfect woman on my blog, but I've never actually dated a guy before. How am I going to say such an embarrassing thing?~

Koremitsu continued to hold his head low, like a statue.

Honoka could see only his messy red hair with a swirl in the center.

Her palms were sweaty, but her caring personality forced her onward.

She may have been somewhat in the wrong for kicking him unreasonably the previous day...

He held the resemblance of a delinquent, but he might be innocent at heart...

And he saw the contents of her phone, so he had control over her weakness...

"If you swear not to tell anyone that I'm the Purple Princess, I might be able to help you."

And so, she finally uttered these words.

Thus, Honoka's love counseling began.

"She's not willing to hear a single word from you? And she threw brushes, buckets and pallets at you–are you an idiot? Her Highness Aoi of the Second Year is a real princess descended from actual nobles. Many of the people on our school's campus, enrolled since kindergarten, can be classified as 'nobles'; but she's considered to be in a better class among them all. It's obvious that you'll be rejected by this flower at such lofty heights! Okay…it's a little old-fashioned, but why don't you try writing a love letter to her? Show that you're serious with a passionate letter, an intellectual letter that surprises her with how refined you are."

"…Will girls be happy when they receive some words?"

Koremitsu frowned as he grumbled.

"Not words, a letter! A note! How can anyone be happy with spoken words, which can be hastily uttered on the spur of the moment?"

Well, how is anyone going to be happy with those? After hearing her words, Koremitsu thought to himself dispiritedly and sat at the table to he write his letter to Aoi.

Under Honoka's guidance, he put thoughts to written word, formulated the sentences from these words into paragraphs, and incorporated the body of text together to form Aoi's letter, which Honoka revised.

Honoka was awed by Koremitsu's artful penmanship.

The strokes of his pen were easily legible, meticulously crafted, and held a certain firmness and masculinity in their structure.

The composition of the letter was like that of an elementary schooler's, and Honoka couldn't help but wonder if it was beyond repair. However, she considered how such beautiful handwriting alone could be adequate in expressions of love.

Honoka herself was anxious, and after meeting Koremitsu the next morning at the station, she left for the school and slipped the letter Koremitsu had copied at home into Aoi's shoe locker.

The two of them then went to the side to watch, and an ivory-skinned Aoi arrived.

The ebony hair draped over her shoulders made the skin look much paler, and her body looked extremely frail.

Hm, now that I look at her, she's really a princess who doesn't match Akagi at all. Well, she is the fiancée of Lord Hikaru after all — She remembered the countenance of the boy christened "Lord Hikaru", and of his commander-esque charisma for which the girls exalted him.

Honoka was not fond of dainty men, but his gentle expression and resplendent smile bred conflict within her. No matter the number of scandals in which he was involved, his grandeur and purity were perpetual. She could understand the affection of the girls who were attracted to such characters.

There was a memorial for Lord Hikaru hung on the notice board next to the staircase, and five more colored papers were stuck to it by the girls, who were still writing on his memorial to convey their sorrow.

Any guy looks ugly when compared to a smiling prince.

But the marriage was arranged by their fathers, and Her Highness Aoi doesn't seem to have any intention of agreeing with that. Perhaps she's annoyed by Lord Hikaru's Casanova behaviors. In that case, we'll have to show her our sincerity.

Next to Honoka stood Koremitsu, staring at Aoi rigidly.

He probably wished for an austere expression, but to Honoka, he looked like he had an eternal grudge.

Uu…I think he's more obsessed than sincere here.

It was then that Aoi caught sight of the letter.

She gave a slight frown.

A line of neatly written words adjacent to the sender's name read, "I'm not a molester."

Upon seeing this, she tore the letter.

"!"

"!"

She stacked the two torn pieces atop one another, tore it once more, threw it into a dustbin, and took her leave.

"Hey, 'Love Expert', that damned girl just tore the letter without reading."

"Ne-next plan, then."

"Got it? Once Her Highness Aoi passes by, I'll give you the signal, and you'll just walk over naturally. Pretend to accidentally drop the notebook. Her Highness Aoi will pick it up for sure. In that case, use this chance to apologize to her like a gentleman."

"Oh, okay."

It was the second class break.

They were lying in wait, having anticipated Aoi's move from her first classroom to the biology room. It was an old-fashioned method, but this classic approach would work effectively against a princess with such delicacy..

"She's coming!"

Honoka gave the signal, and Koremitsu walked out.

~~Why must you put your hands in your pockets!? You're practically a delinquent now!

Koremitsu planned to, with his hands in his pockets, ‘ accidentally’ drop his student notebook.

Ahhh, seriously! Don’t lower your chin and arch your back like that! Why are you glaring and pouting!?

With Honoka watching him dubiously, Koremitsu dropped his notebook.

Aoi walked in the direction of Koremitsu’s dropped notebook.

She would surely retrieve his notebook—

Or not.

Instead, she stepped on it and left.

“Hey, my new notebook has a footprint on it now.”

“~~, next!”

Thusly, Koremitsu complied with Honoka’s instructions and attempted to meet Aoi by coincidence, but it seemed that Aoi was steadfast on ignoring Koremitsu no matter the situation.

Despite the number of ways Koremitsu tried to capture Aoi’s attention, she would readily ignore him by looking forward with a fictitious blank stare. She would then go on to walk away from him.

After school, on the roof.

"You strategies aren't effective at all, 'Love Expert'."

Honoka's quibble came in response to Koremitsu's complaint.

"Your face is too savage, okay? Everyone will be wary of you when you approach them with that face of yours!"

"You want me to get cosmetic surgery!?"

"Uuu, in that case, we'll have to use the reverse charm by making you a decent guy despite your delinquent looks. Alright, let's do this, tsundere delinquent!"

"I'M NOT A DELINQUENT!"

The following day, Koremitsu equipped himself with an assortment of kittens' things.

He bore badges of kittens on his chest and shoes, his socks had kitten footprints etched on them, his phone's keychain strap help a kitten mascot, and the head of a toy kitten protruded from his schoolbag.

From the information Honoka had relayed to Koremitsu, Aoi liked cats. Her cellphone's screen-saver was a photo of the beloved cat she raised herself.

The name of this cherished cat was Shellblue, and it was apparently procured from a cardboard box in the park. The cat was a stray, but Aoi gave Shellblue her adulation, and the two of them would snuggle whilst abed.

Once they had ascertained that Aoi traveled to school by bus, Koremitsu and Honoka waited by the bus stop for her, and commenced their endeavor.

On that morning, Aoi's face was as pale as ever, and she gave the impression of being notably uneasy.

The duo ambled past her, conversing loud enough to be overheard.

"Hey, Akagi. The cats you saved from drowning in the river yesterday, are they okay?"

"Yeah, that was quite a stormy night. The four cats that were in a cardboard box floating down the river are still energetic."

"I heard you saved a cat from a crow."

"Oh, that pregnant calico cat? I helped deliver its baby."

"You really like cats, huh?~ I admit it's my fault for kicking you because I thought you were a molester. There isn't a cat lover who'

s bad at heart. Oh yes, I heard that you have a collection of cat photos?"

"Oh, I can lend it to you whenever you want."

At last, Aoi, who had been walking behind them, interrupted.

"Well?"

Koremitsu and Honoka's ears twitched.

It's working!

However...

"Can you please not get in my way?"

The cold voice inquired.

"Ah…Sorry."

Koremitsu hastily moved aside.

Aoi gave a look which evoked fear in the two of them as she passed.

"…Hey, 'Love Expert', I got ignored again, right?"

Koremitsu groaned.

"I say…isn't it better for you to give up?"

It was lunch break.

Honoka and Koremitsu stood at the railing atop the school's roof, admiring the scenery, and Honoka voiced her thoughts on the days' happenings.

"I do feel sorry that I can't help you out even though you've bowed to me and asked, but looking at Her Highness Aoi's response, I do feel that it's somewhat impossible."

Honoka was reluctant to say something so discouraging, and she felt remorseful pangs to the heart as the words left her mouth.

"You've already tried hard. I thought you were just some delinquent molester - some bad guy, but it's really impressive to see you being so serious about the person you like. Since you've done all you can, I don't think it's a bad idea to give up."

Normally, it would hard for someone to pick themselves up after being rejected by the one they liked. However, Koremitsu kept standing up no matter how many times he failed.

No matter how awkward or embarrassing Honoka's instructions were, he would follow them steadfastly.

Even though he is a molester…

"If you don't mind, I'll introduce some girls who're unattached."

She accidentally let this slip.

This is bad…who do I introduce him to? Even though I know a lot of girls who don't have boyfriends…well, maybe Riko can. Since she likes horror films, I think she has some resistance to a scary face…

She was mulling over whether she knew any girls who would be unaffected by Koremitsu's appearance when she was interrupted.

"She has to be the one."

Koremitsu's gaze dropped to the handrail as he said this.

Honoka turned her attention toward Koremitsu and saw him frowning, his face filled with agony, and his hands trembling as they gripped the railing.

In spite of this downcast position, under the messy red hair hanging from his lowered head, his eyes bore an intense aura.

"I'll never give up, no matter what."

He made this declaration lucidly.

Honoka was mesmerized by both his sidelong look, and by the determination in his voice.

BA—DUM! Her heart jumped, and her face grew hot as though it were on fire.

Wha-what is it?

Why is my face turning red now!?

And my chest, it's, feeling unbearable—what is this?

Is it because of Akagi?

Because Akagi said that he won't give up?

Any other boy would have given long before. It was said that, after Hikaru's death, there had been many boys to approach Aoi, but they all gave up soon after she coldly rejected them.

The boys to try and woo her were all handsome, academically outstanding, rich children, brimming with self-confidence—the children of the 'nobles' who had been in this school since kindergarten.

However, this Koremitsu, who was infamous for being a delinquent, who was deemed worse than a peasant, a wild dog - who fell far short of them, said that he would not give up.

Koremitsu turned his head to look at Honoka.

His foolishly straightforward expression - a resolute expression - stared right at Honoka.

"I'm really sorry to make you help me out when you're so busy. Thank you, but I'll try to continue on my own."

He spoke ungracefully.

Upon hearing this, Honoka felt her face burn as her heart pounded still harder.

"Even if you try again, you might not succeed."

Koremitsu also stiffened his face as he looked back at Honoka with fiery conviction.

"But even so, I have to try."

The wind whisked Koremitsu's red hair.

Honoka wavered at his determination.

Even though he's a delinquent, a molester…

She muttered in her heart.

Why am I so concerned with Akagi?

He already said that he doesn't need my love advice...

Once classes for the day had ended, Honoka packed her things dispiritedly.

The neighboring chair was empty, and he evidently ran off to Aoi.

That idiot. He'll definitely get dumped anyway.

"Hono… **you've been on good terms with Akagi lately**."

"EH!?"

Honoka's good friend with the braided hair, Michiru, interjected suddenly, and Honoka shrieked in surprise.

"Ah, I feel the same! You're able to talk to Akagi. Aren't you scared of him?"

"I heard that you managed to strike up a good conversation with Akagi on the roof. Is this true?"

The girls came to approach her with an enthusiastic interrogation.

The tips of her ears were burning up.

"Wh-what are you saying? How can anything happen between me and that delinquent? Anyway, it's impossible. I like those who're knowledgeable, bashful—right, I like those intellectual boys."

She gave a firm denial.

Right, what kind of joke is this? To have a rumor about me and Akagi?

"See, there **have been** a lot of handsome boys who confessed to you before, Honoka."

"But you rejected them all by saying 'let's just be friends.' There's no such thing as friendship between boys and girls, right?"

"Right."

Every classmate, with the exception of Michiru, simultaneously gave their consent.

Michiru looked to Honoka through her large glasses and gave her late response.

"Honoka, you shouldn't be too picky just because you're cool. Be careful of spending your three years in high school without a boyfriend."

"That's right. How about we go for a joint party? It'll be easy to get the boys to come along if they know you're coming with."

"Sorry, but I'm not in the mood for this now."

Her answer was abrupt.

"Don't say that. How about you try it out too, class rep?"

Michiru replied to the question with a troubled smile.

"A joint party for me is a little…"

It was then that an intelligent-sounding voice rang from the back door of the classroom.

"Is Miss Honoka Shikibu still around?"

Honoka turned to face the door, and upon seeing the source of the voice, rose frantically from her seat.

Sleek, long black hair easily capable of leaving an indelible impression rested neatly over the shoulders of a tall beauty standing at the door. Her very being suppressed the surrounding atmosphere in captivating abeyance.

Her black eyes narrowly stared at Honoka in silence.

It was no glare, yet the unyielding Honoka felt her chest tighten.

Why is the president—

She felt sweat roll down her back.

"I'm Shikibu."

She could only think of one reason for her, an upperclassman whose reputation was higher than any other 'noble', to visit a peasant-like student who was not enrolled until middle school, and remembering this rumor about Koremitsu and herself only served to make her stomach ache all the more.

The president of the Heian Academy High School Student Council, Asai Saiga - dubbed the Matriarch Asa - spoke to a pensive Honoka in calm authority.

"There's something I want to ask you about. Could you please come over to the Student Council room?"

Koremitsu was troubled as he stood in the arts room.

Aoi had turned her back to him and returned to painting.

Koremitsu, standing behind her, gave off the impression of a starving dog; but no matter how he agonized over things, it would not change the situation.

"Isn't this Sunday your birthday?"

He spoke to her sincerely.

"…"

"Can't you accompany me for just one day?"

"…"

Aoi continued to move her brush wordlessly.

On the canvas, there was a staircase on the semitransparent golden mist. The painting felt so warm, but Aoi's back alongside looked as cold as the fluttering snowflakes. The other members of the art club were away from the two, fidgeting in their seats, uncomfortable to a point where one would have to feel sorry for them.

Darn, how am I supposed to make her look at me?

He had already told Honoka that he would handle the rest, but could he make Aoi change her mind before her birthday?

There was not much time left, and this predicament caused Koremitsu's throat to dry up because of the anxiousness.

Your 'girlfriend' is too tough to handle.

He gave Hikaru a bitter look.

Hikaru responded with an equally distressed glance, but let known his determination by putting on a smile and passing by Koremitsu to stand next to Aoi.

"Miss Aoi."

He looked to the side of an unmoving Aoi's face with a gentle expression, and he called out to her calmly.

"The gifting of your seven birthday presents may be an imprudent act to you, Miss Aoi, but that is a very important promise to me."

As the warm, gentle sunlight shone in through the window—his sweet, sentimental voice flowed out like a pure fragrance.

"I'll continue to stay here in order to fulfill the promise I made with you, Miss Aoi."

Aoi could not hear Hikaru's words—

But after seeing Hikaru speak so earnestly, Koremitsu's breath caught.

Hikaru's voice slightly weakened.

"So my voice really can't reach Miss Aoi's ears at all…if you hear me , even if it's a little bit, please put a finger to your lips to indicate so."

Damn…what's with that expression?

It was likely that Hikaru had known since long ago that no matter whether it was his voice or his silhouette, Aoi was unable to detect it.

Even knowing it was impossible, he continued to hope that Aoi, who painted still with her back to him, would turn to him and see.

As he gazed upon the seemingly distant petite figure that looked ever forward, Koremitsu remembered something he had forgotten long ago.

The silhouette of a back, vanishing into the darkness under the weak lighting of a street lamp.

During his adolescent days, when he continued to look out of the window blankly, there was no response no matter how he called out—

That back overlapped with Aoi's.

Neither of them would turn around.

"…Aoi."

Hikaru's languishing voice called out once more, and ostensibly pleaded for a miracle.

In his adolescence, Koremitsu prayed for his mother to smile at him, for her to lift her head up to him, and for her to, even with the slightest smile, pat his head.

Please, please.

Please, God.

He prayed countless times in his heart

Please, please help me.

Tch, what was I thinking back then?

Nine years ago, on his mother's birthday, he decided to gift his mother with her favorite word. After attending his grandfather's calligraphy class, he sat atop the study table, ground some ink, and wrote the word on Japanese writing paper.

His calligraphy was not adept, so he had to rewrite it a few times.

As he wrote, he prayed to God for his gift to bring joy to his mother, and the ink with which he wrote spattered onto his hands and face.

On that night, before he could offer his present to his mother, she abandoned the young Koremitsu and ran away from home.

Her slender figure faded into darkness, and never to return.

—I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, Mitsu.

He continued to write, giving it his utmost effort as he tried to both cease the tears which fell from his mother's face as she apologized, and make her smile. In the end, he never gave her his writings.

The day after his mother left, he drew crosses on each paper he wrote on. Snot dripped from his nose as he drew cross after cross.

As he gazed upon Aoi, he felt it was not her back he was seeing, but his mother's - the feeling stayed for but a moment.

God never answered Koremitsu's prayers.

When Hikaru showed to him that all too familiar praying expression, Koremitsu could not help but pray for him as well.

Even if it's for just a little while, grant this guy's wish. I can see this so clearly; can't you let Aoi hear a little of it too?

Just as Koremitsu's chest began to ache like it were being crushed, Aoi dipped her brush into the dark brown color on her pallet. The brush made a long black line diagonally down from the top left corner on the canvas.

Hikaru's expression immediately froze.

Koremitsu felt as though he were being sliced from the front.

Aoi went on to draw a line diagonally from the top right corner.

The large black cross he had drawn when he was a child was brought to mind again, and he felt as though his eyes were set aflame.

"What are you doing!?"

Koremitsu bellowed as he grabbed Aoi by the arm.

The other members looked on with horrified expressions; the members who had been perming their hair and giving each other manicures dropped their curling irons and nail polish.

There was a large, ugly cross on the canvas that had the breath of light on it.

"Please don't, touch me."

Aoi shook off Koremitsu's hand.

Her skin was a ghastly pale, and her eyes held rage and resentment.

"You…why did you do that to the painting!?"

"I can't—talk with you. That's what Asa told me."

Dang! That Asa again?

Aoi turned her face away from Koremitsu as she forcefully let out these words while seemingly restraining her inner emotions.

Aoi turned away from Koremitsu as she forcefully said such, but her true emotions seemed to be withheld.

"That's why I'm just *muttering to myself*…that Hikaru…"

Hikaru had been standing beside Aoi blankly, but, at the sound of his name, his shoulders jerked.

Koremitsu was filled with apprehension and held his breath.

What's she going to say? Something worse?

"…As far as I know…Hikaru…"

Her tender lips seemed pain as she let out these words, and her hands trembled slightly.

"…He's the most dishonest person…on this world…"

Her face steeled, and a pitiless glint showed in her eyes. Hikaru, who stood in front of her, lowered his eyebrows and looked to Aoi with pain in his eyes.

No. That's enough, don't say anything more.

"The worst—liar."

Hikaru's eyes were tinted with the color of agony.

Koremitsu's heart felt like it had been slashed off.

Hikaru understood how extremely insincere he had been to Aoi , and yet, the words said in front of him, and the cross drawn on the canvas swallowed his heart whole; the agony of being refused by a person so precious brought his soul to lament.

"…! You don't have to be so vicious, even though Hikaru himself is quite the playboy."

Aoi folded her arms and muttered.

"That's a fact anyway…I hated Hikaru most on this world. He angers me all the time, and he lies to me most. There's no other guy worse than him. He's a completely rotten man inside despite his exquisite appearance on the outside."

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU SAYING!?"

Aoi disparaging Hikaru troubled Koremitsu, and it reminded him of his unanswered prayers, and of the emotions he had experienced as a child: pain and despair. These things were wrenched from deep within his heart, and the blood rushed to his head; his veins were throbbing with rage which rose from far below his belly.

"Koremitsu."

Hikaru gave an effort to allay Koremitsu, but the rage devouring him only grew fiercer. Aoi bit her lips and breathed lightly, but continued to blame Hikaru.

"I don't know exactly how many Hikaru went out with, but that 's because I can't count them all. He's always with different women, and when I ask him 'Who is that person?', he'll answer 'an acquaintance', or 'a friend' with that saintly smile on his face. Anyway, he'll answer me with a gentle smile on his face, even when I'm angry—he'll smile and carry out those dishonest acts with other girls."

Her typically pale face was dyed red.

Hikaru gave Aoi his support and continued to plead with Koremitsu, telling him, "I'm really okay here!"

"That's—that's why, that low-life of a man deserves my retribution!"

Upon hearing this, Koremitsu let out a roar.

"DON'T YOU *DARE* SAY THAT AS A MATTER OF FACT!"

His outburst rattled the window and startled Aoi.

"Calm down, Koremitsu! I'm fine here! Okay? You see, everyone's scared now."

Hikaru tried what he could to stop Koremitsu, but his overflowing emotions could not be contained.

"HIKARU'S NOT SOME TRASH! HE'S DEFINITELY NOT A LOWLIFE! HE'S TRYING HIS BEST TO FULFILL HIS PROMISE WITH YOU, EVEN NOW!"

He said that it was a very important promise.

He said that she was a very important girl.

Even now, he looked at Aoi with such passion, such tenderness, such melancholy! He continued to talk to her in vain, hoping she would notice him.

His mother turned her back and walked away.

Aoi drew the large cross on the canvas.

He kept pleading with her, and kept practicing to make her happy.

Why should she just ignore and abandon it so lightly!?

After noticing the art club members were huddled together in fear, he tightly clamped his teeth together.

"__"

He reflected on the outburst he had after losing himself, but it was due to the uncontrollable rage he felt at Aoi's words.

"Fine, that's enough."

He shot Aoi his worst belittling glare.

"You have no right to accept Hikaru's feelings. Who's willing to do so here? It's a waste to present them to someone like you."

Aoi bit her lips as large teardrops streamed from her eyes, and she tried to pull away from Koremitsu.

"So…be it then. Even if he's alive, he won't keep to this promise anyway. He'll treat this promise like it's nothing."

She let out a quiet choking sound, gave Koremitsu a cold glare, and continued to speak stiffly.

"…It'll just be a spur of moment like before anyway."

Koremitsu could no longer endure Aoi's denial of Hikaru, and he was not willing to let Hikaru listen any longer either. He yanked open the door and left the arts' room.

"Hurry up, forget about that kind of woman and just go to heaven! It's just like what gramps said, women are the worst!"

He shouted with a trembling voice as he walked down the hallway.

He was furious enough to ignore the stares that were on him. His chest felt like it had been sliced apart, and his head felt boiled. His eyes were hot, and his nose was stuffed.

"Are you crying, Koremitsu?"

Hikaru inquired in his state of awe.

"Th-this is why I say that—I don't know how to appeal to women at all. They get sad, angry whenever they feel like it—they don't talk when they don't feel like it, they walk away when they feel like it—"

Despite his efforts to stop it, snot leaked from his nose, and he couldn't stop the tears from rolling down his cheeks.

"That's why I hate to get involved with women in any way… don't kid around with me. Damn it, she wouldn't even try to understand other people's intention…she's got to be joking."

His chest was burning, and bitter, salty tears ran down his face.

He covered his face with his hands to mask his sobbing; for him , a man, to cry was embarrassing.

"…Koremitsu, let's go over there."

At Hikaru's suggestion, Koremitsu staggered off to a relatively vacant corridor and squatted down in a corner. He let out his regret, and Hikaru quietly went about consoling him.

"…Sorry Koremitsu. It's my fault for entrusting this to you. You were hurt as a result."

It's not your fault. Koremitsu wanted to answer.

The wrath he felt toward Aoi was no fault of Hikaru's. The traumatic experiences he experienced in his childhood were the source of his anger, and he only worsened his situation by pushing this rage onto Aoi.

Hikaru's voice was all too soothing, and it, like a warm hand, calmed Koremitsu's heart. After being calmed, he inadvertently spoke.

"Don't say sorry or anything now."

"But,"

"I hate it when people say sorry. What can you change when you say that? Can it solve anything? It's because nothing can be changed that we say sorry, right…!? So don't say sorry to me."

Until recently, receiving apologies from others was unfamiliar to Koremitsu.

Sorry.

Sorry.

Mitsu.

Sorry.

His mothers ashen face was turned towards the young Koremitsu; her cheeks were wet, and time and time again she would apologize with a weak voice. “Sorry, sorry.”

Her face was blurred, and Koremitsu could not recall it.

Yet, the tears which rolled down that face, the tender voice that said sorry continually, the slender body that disappeared. He would recall these occasionally, and his heart felt as though it had been torn apart.

—I’m sorry, Mr Akagi.

—Sorry.

His classmates would apologize to him with terror evident on their faces.

They would then leave with a ghastly complexion.

He never thought of making them apologize.

These words hurt his innermost being and created scars that could never heal.

That's why I really hate it when you say sorry! Don't end everything with sorry!

Koremitsu had no handle on his rising emotions, and he pouted like an unreasonable child, covering himself as he wailed. Hikaru gently laid his hand on Koremitsu's shoulder.

Koremitsu looked to Hikaru's hand and saw that it sank down into his shoulder. Hikaru gently lowered his gaze and approached the other half of Koremitsu's body.

A ghost should have no body heat, but Koremitsu felt a warmth coming from the shoulder Hikaru's hand touched; this warmth, along with Hikaru's gentle expression, put his heart at ease.

This was his first time being comforted by another.

He had never before had a friend to listen to his complaints, even if that friend was only 'temporary'.

"I…I'm not some 'girl' who's crying."

His protest was followed by sniffing.

"Hm, I already knew that you aren't some pitiful poppy."

Hikaru whispered gently.

"So, so why…must I be comforted by you? Aoi already said all sorts of unbearable things about you, and you're dead; you should be suffering at least a hundred times more than me. In that case, I

should be the one comforting you. Now I really want to cry when I see you show such a calm expression."

Hikaru rested his hand once again on Koremitsu's shoulder, and answered with a calm and mature demeanor.

"I can't cry…I have no memory of crying. I don't know how to cry."

Hikaru looked back to the wide-eyed Koremitsu with a compassionate smile.

"My mother used to be my father's mistress. She was frail, and she died when I was 4. Just before my mother died, she told me this. 'Hikaru, you have to keep smiling no matter what. If you do that, everyone will love you. If anyone does anything bad to you, fill your heart with love and smile back—'"

Hikaru narrated his dead mother's words with a clear voice, and he showed a profound and still expression.

Hikaru repeated his late mother's words with a halcyon voice and a profound yet still mien.

"My mother definitely knew that she would not live for long, and wanted to teach me a way to get along with my relatives and father's family."

He closed his eyes.

There was still no tear shed below his long eyebrows.

"What does it feel like to let the tears flow?"

The question came with an expectant tone.

—Please keep on smiling, Hikaru.

—Fill your heart with love.

His mother died when he was four, so how did he live on after that …whose house was he staying in? Who was he living with?

Hikaru's words left no uncertainty; he was never accustomed to his new family, and his life was difficult. He simply continued to follow his mother's advice and smiled.

"Please keep on smiling."

Certainly, a smile was Hikaru's sole defense.

Koremitsu mused over Hikaru's life and how he spent it alone. His crying was reinforced by this, and, even with his best efforts, he could not stop.

Koremitsu forgot how to smile when he was young.

Nobody taught Hikaru how to cry.

"It's really hard to tell from your appearance, but you really can cry, Koremitsu. That's too bad. If I can cry like you, the girls' maternal instincts will kick in and they'll start comforting me. Most will definitely give me a wonderful service too."

Hikaru spoke nonchalantly with an affectionate smile on his lips.

He probably meant to cheer Koremitsu up this way.

"You pervert."

Koremitsu replied gruffly and wiped his tears on his sleeves.

The corridor in front of the vacant classroom was devoid of people, and the mystical space held a rejuvenating ambience which allayed Koremitsu's scorching face.

He managed to stop his tears, but still wanted to sit beside Hikaru for a while. He felt a complex sense of empathy and trust as he tried to express this vague emotion while cuddling his knees.

He held his tears, but still desired to sit beside Hikaru for a while longer. His complex feelings toward Hikaru held both empathy and trust, and he tried to articulate what he felt.

"…H-Hey, didn't I say…that flowers wilt easily and aren't edible before…they can't be used for anything…?"

"Yeah. We agreed to go on a picnic too."

"What kind of agreement is that—"

"Haha, didn't I mention it?"

"Well…when I was first hospitalized, Koharu brought me some flowers."

"Heh."

"They were white flowers on the stalks…and the buds were hairy. I thought that it might be a little too sinister to receive white flowers in a hospital, but my heart calmed down whenever I glanced at it from my bed…when I was anxious over the fact that I could not attend school during the start of the semester, but I just felt calm immediately after looking at them…I felt that there was nothing I could accomplish by being so anxious."

A smile played on Hikaru's lips, and his eyes narrowed.

His appearance gave off a happy radiance.

"Yeah, flowers do have that kind of power. It makes one happy to see them."

"W-well…they might really have that kind of power. That's why…I can hear you out on flowers once in awhile."

Koremitsu's willingness to listen to Hikaru's talk of flowers delighted him, and he flashed a brilliant smile.

"Thank you."

"But just once in awhile."

"Got it. I won't go to the extent of annoying you then. Speaking of which, I remember you're hospitalized because you were hit by a truck, right? How did that happen? Will you give me an answer if I ask for it now?"

"Uu."

The question left Koremitsu dumbfounded.

Hikaru resembled a childish prankster as he awaited an answer, and Koremitsu felt Hikaru too was hoping to gauge how close the two of them had become since his first appearance as a ghost.

Koremitsu answered dazedly.

"…Some old man wanted to cross the traffic junction even though the light was red…I told him to stop, but he trotted towards the truck while yelling 'Ogre~'. I chased after him, and got hit by the truck."

Someone, perhaps the driver or a passerby, gave a shout to warn him of the danger, but Koremitsu was sent flying before he had time to react. Koremitsu awoke in the hospital, and in place of the old man, Koharu stood beside his bed.

"So you saved the old man, Koremitsu. What a hero."

"I'm not. Don't say it like it's some glorious thing."

The old man ran from Koremitsu after catching sight of his terrifying visage, and Koremitsu himself was struck by the truck. This catastrophe was beyond embarrassing, and he hadn't the gall to call himself a hero.

Hikaru chuckled.

"Isn't this good, hero? Your face is red, hero. You love to cry and get shy very easily, hero."

"Alright, you had enough? Tch, let's go home."

Koremitsu realized that he was further flustered by his narrations, and they only fed Hikaru's desire to tease him. Upon this revelation, he grew somber and stood.

He then turned away from Hikaru and intended to depart, but Hikaru's chuckling was replaced with a sincere tone.

"Hey, hero, there's a place I want to pass by. Will you come along with me? I'll show you some cute flowers I've been keeping."

</noinclude>

Chapter 4 - Where Do People Go When They Die?

Hikaru led Koremitsu to his upper class apartment which was a mere twenty minute walk from the school.

It was said that the apartment complex was owned by Hikaru's father; Hikaru used to live alone in one of the apartments.

The entrance was equipped with an automatic lock, and the caretaker was a man well into his years.

"I'm Hikaru's friend. Can I go to his room? There's something I lent him."

The caretaker eyed Koremitsu's disheveled hair and uniform circumspectly.

"Nope, I can't let in anyone I don't know. Besides, how would I know that you're Master Hikaru's friend?"

As expected, he was refused.

Oh damn, what do I do now?

Koremitsu grimaced and speculated over his next move when he his thoughts were interrupted by Hikaru.

"Tell him you'll bring him the limited chestnut-steamed Ykan[10] from Taiseido next time."

What's that? Koremitsu lowered his head in wonder.

"I'll bring you the limited chestnut-steamed Yōkan from Taiseido next time as a gift, if you want."

He secretly lifted his stare, and saw the caretaker's eyes widen as he shuddered.

What's going on! Does he have a heart attack!?

Just when Koremitsu was panicking, tears welled up in the caretaker's eyes.

"Is that so…Young Master Hikaru said when he went to the villa that morning 'I'll bring you that limited edition chestnut-steamed Yōkan from Taisedo'. That's because he saw this recommendation on television a few days ago and said 'It's looks really nice. Let's go and try it together, Mr. Maezono'…Young Master Hikaru was very emphatic with others around him ever since he was young…"

He inadvertently choked on his words as he said this.

"It's really great to see that Young Master Hikaru has a male friend. He always talked about how he wanted to have a friend of the same gender."

He said delightedly as he let out snot, opened the lock, and brought Koremitsu to Hikaru's room on the highest level.

"The room is kept in the same condition as when Young Master Hikaru is alive. Just give me a holler when you want to head back. "

The caretaker said this, and went back to his room.

"Mister Maezono used to be my father's chauffeur, and I've been well taken care of by him ever since I was young. Even when I started living alone, he kept coming over to talk with me like a real grandfather, and he would worry about me whenever I returned home late."

Hikaru spoke with a reminiscing voice.

"When did you start living here?"

"Since the first year of middle school."

He answered without hesitation.

First year of middle school, huh? Wasn't he still a kid back then?

Koremitsu felt a little shocked.

The room with the wooden-tiled floor was extremely wide, and there was no carpet laid out.

There were practically no furniture, let alone a television. There was a sofa, a large dining table that was inappropriate for someone living alone, with 4 chairs lined around it. The table looked like it had not been used before, and one could get a feeling that nobody lived here before.

The caretaker did say before that this was the condition of the room when Hikaru was alive. Did Hikaru live in this lonely room every day?

"I was the one who suggested that I should live alone. I'll gain more freedom like this."

Hikaru was dressed up in shirt and jeans as he moved around barefooted (this was most probably Hikaru's casual attire), and Koremitsu felt a sense of loneliness when he saw Hikaru in this state.

Perhaps it was because he saw Koremitsu's utter silence that Hikaru grinned and said heartily.

"My father was very rich, so I never had any worries financially, and I lived a carefree and lazy life. I don't have to contact my family when I have girls living in my house. Nobody will tell me off even if I stay at a girl's house for a few days, and I can go out in the middle of the night if girls call me."

"Tch, you're already a Casanova in middle school!?"

He felt a loss of words,

—I can't sleep alone because I'm scared of loneliness.

He recalled the words Hikaru used to say, and felt like chest tighten.

—and I can only relax when someone accompanies me…

Don't tell me this guy dated so many girls because he's too lonely?

The moment he thought of how Hikaru looked as he cupped his knees in the midst of this wide room, sparsely filled with furniture, Koremitsu showed a serious expression.

Koremitsu himself understood the loneliness of having no parents best.

After being with Hikaru for such a long time, there was one thing he understood.

His smile was not to be trusted.

Even if it was unbearable to a point where he had to cough out blood, even if the loneliness felt like it was going to pry a hole open in him, he would continue to smile.

This made Koremitsu really frustrated.

Hikaru opened his eyes gently as he gave a gentle smile.

"*There should be a photo album in the closet. I brought you here to show it to you.*"

"So the extremely pretty flowers you're talking about refer to the photos?"

"*Are you hoping for a blond maid to invite you in?*"

"Shut up, I already told you that I hate women, you idiot."

"Then, how about I change into a maid outfit and say to you, ' welcome back, master~'?"

"No way, that's disgusting."

"But I feel that it should suit me somewhat." As Hikaru rambled on, Koremitsu opened the closet embedded into the wall and took out several photo albums that were stacked inside.

He sat down on the wooden floor, flipped the albums, and found many baby photos inside.

Are these Hikaru's photos?

Hikaru had an angelic face when he was a baby, a stark contrast to Koremitsu's savage-looking face ever since he was born.

Some of Hikaru's photos showed him smiling gently, some showed his sucking on the milk bottle as he widened his round eyes at the camera, some showed him reaching his small maple leaf-like hands as he chortled, and some showed him taking a nap with a furry puppy-like toy.

There were so many of these photos that could make it as the cover for a baby magazine, to a point where it felt endless.

"…Dude, are the pretty flowers referring to you? You want to show me your baby photos?"

His eyes were certainly large and round like a girl's,

But even so, Koremitsu had no interest in such cute things. Even if there was certainly a rare beautiful baby, he would naturally get frustrated if he were to continue looking on at the same baby.

"They're at the back."

Hikaru said as he sat down beside Koremitsu, browsing the photo album.

"Tch, aren't they all baby photos. And—"

Koremitsu spotted a photo, and his hand that was flipping through the pages stopped.

These were Hikaru's photos as a baby, but there were no one else in the previous photos. However, there was a woman cradling Hikaru in the photo.

The young woman sitting on the chair smiled gently at the camera, and she looked exactly like Hikaru.

But this face…

"Hey, is this your mother? I saw someone similar to her during your funeral. Is she your relative too?"

The woman he was referring to was the woman dressed in black at Hikaru's funeral, weeping and smiling.

Koremitsu himself was perplexed by this smile.

He wondered who that woman was, and why she was able to calm so calmly at the funeral.

"That person's…"

Hikaru's voice stopped out of a sudden.

Intrigued, Koremitsu looked over, and he spotted Hikaru's gloomy expression.

Did I ask something I shouldn't have?

Hikaru bit onto his lips hard, seemingly in deep thought, and Koremitsu had a bad feeling about this.

As he wondered about how to break this silence however, Hikaru immediately lifted his face and grinned heartily.

That clear yet transparent smile made the previous expression of tension seem like an illusion.

"Yup, that's right. She's a relative of my mother."

"I see. No wonder the likeness is there."

Koremitsu too answered with a clear voice. He felt that there was a need to do so.

He felt that he should not ask about that woman again.

"I want to show you what's further behind. Keep flipping, Koremitsu."

"Oh, okay."

He flipped to the next page.

What appeared on it were not baby photos, but photos of Hikaru as a toddler. He continued to flip the pages, and found photos of Hikaru, aged 5-6, standing with girls of around the same age.

There were two girls on the photos; one of them was an intelligent looking girl with radiant black hair who stood a little taller than Hikaru, while the other was a girl, shorter than Hikaru by half a head, with a white ribbon tied on her loose and beautiful black hair.

There were many photos of the trio or two-man shots taken by one of the girls.

The tallest girl amongst the trio would give a serious look practically all the time when their photos were taken, and the shortest girl with the ribbon on her head would show varied expressions on the photos.

She would sometimes puff her cheeks, sometimes widen her eyes as her face was blushing, sometimes pout away with tears in her eyes, sometimes fidget away due to shyness, or would chuckle from time to time.

"Is the one with the ribbon Aoi?"

Hikaru answered gently,

"Yes, and the other one's Asa."

His expression was so gentle as he looked at the photo.

"Asa, as in the one who told Aoi to ignore me? So she's Asa."

Koremitsu glared at the intellectual looking girl on the photo.

"Asa's name is called Asai, and she's my cousin on the paternal side, Aoi's close friend. Aoi and Asa are a year older than me, and they're my childhood playmates. The three of us were together since we were very little."

On one hand, Hikaru's expression still looked so radiant.

When the trio was lined together, the calm and aloof Asai would stand in the middle. Hikaru stood on the left with the smile plastered on his face, while Aoi was shyly fidgeting away on the right side. It seemed that Aoi was glancing aside at Hikaru, but she would deliberately turn her petite face away whenever it was time for them to take photos together.

Koremitsu glanced aside at Hikaru, and discovered that their faces were nearly sticking together as the latter looked back with his clear eyes.

He then spoke with a gentle tone that was full of love,

"Miss Aoi was a little clumsy when she was young…and she's shy… she always had Asa accompany her when she comes over to my house. She would blush and say something like, 'Asa said that she wants to come

to your house to play, Hikaru, so I came along'. She loves to drink the sweet milkshakes, but will scowl in front of me and drink sugarless coffee …that's the kind of child she was."

That was a really sweet expression.

That was really a gentle narrating voice.

As he listened on, Koremitsu experienced a new, fuzzy feeling in his heart.

He could not comprehend what this was, but he did not really hate this sickeningly sweet feeling that had a little warmth and a little sadness.

"When I secretly added sugar into Miss Aoi's coffee, her eyes will widen into a round shape, and she would blush as she stared back at me. She's really cute, so I could not help but start adding sugar into her coffee secretly. Miss Aoi would then look at the cup to prevent me to doing so."

It was a like a blissful daily episode.

His expression looked like it was going to melt.

"Miss Aoi looks really cute when she's shocked, and her reactions after that became interesting and cute too. Thus, I could not help but tease her again and again. However, it seemed that Miss Aoi was angry as she told me off for teasing her even though she was older than me, and that I'm rude like a delinquent."

Hikaru's voice got a little softer, and he showed a thin smile on his face.

"My betrothal with Miss Aoi was decided by our families, but I feel that it's fine for her to be my 'most beloved'…"

The eyes were full of gentleness and sadness as they glanced aside at Koremitsu.

"…Miss Aoi…was my 'hope'."

That was a silent voice that was ostensibly about to dye his heart.

Hope…? Her?

Before arriving here, Koremitsu was very infuriated with Aoi.

He even advised Hikaru to forget about this obstinate and incomprehensible woman.

However, the Aoi that was left in Hikaru's heart was probably deeper than what Koremitsu could even imagine…she spat such overboard things in front of Hikaru's face, but Hikaru's affections for her had never changed.

Hikaru showed a tint of loneliness on his face.

"That's why...even though it's easy for me to embrace other girls, I just feel…that Miss Aoi is the only one I can't touch. Maybe it's because I 'm scared that she'll really say that she hates me. Because Miss Aoi…is really a very important person to me."

Koremitsu's heart was hurting.

The anger he had for Aoi faded gradually, and what came in place of it was a surge of sadness.

"Don't you have many other women beside Aoi?"

"Yes."

"Then, haven't you thought of breaking up with them for the sake of Aoi?"

Once Koremitsu asked this, Hikaru's eyes turned hollow.

"You haven't?"

"…About that, it might be despicable of me to say this, but I should say probably not. That's because I can't just do all that for Miss Aoi's sake…however, I guess I'll have to clear a line with the other girls if I want to live with Miss Aoi. If I don't do so, there won't be a new beginning…the birthday gift was an opportunity, so I sent a letter before heading to the villa…and prepared the remaining gifts."

His voice sounded a little harsh, and he suddenly shut up midway through.

The light brown eyes under the lowered eyelashes showed a darkness that was miry.

Koremitsu did not know how Hikaru managed to date so many women went out with, and did not know what Hikaru was planning to cut off in order to start afresh.

If one were to calm down and think, he would realize that breaking up with the other women for the sake of Aoi was a little too selfish.

Those who were unpopular with girls would definitely lash out at him after hearing such troubles, and the girls who were dumped may be vengeful enough to choke him to death.

But Koremitsu could not even say anything to tell off Hikaru—after seeing the latter's sad and dull eyes.

Hikaru's body was no longer on this Earth.

He could no longer be together with Aoi, who he described with such a gentle expression.

Hikaru remained silent.

"…"

And Koremitsu suddenly tensed up.

Th-this is a chance for me to repay him for comforting me at school. Pull yourself together, there's still tomorrow—oh wait, this guy doesn't have a tomorrow. He's dead.

His temples rose up, and he decided to pat Hikaru on the shoulder first before talking.

But of course, his hand passed through Hikaru's shoulder, and the momentum caused him to slap his hand on his chest.

As it was overly forceful, his body was knocked back in the face of this impact his chest was undefended against.

"? What are you doing, Koremitsu?"

Hikaru asked in a perplexed manner as he looked down at Koremitsu, who fell with his back on the floor after the hit.

"S-shut up! I'm doing gymnastics!"

"Why must you be doing gymnastics now? I think I just heard your head crash into the floor too."

Koremitsu was flustered as he was flailing around helplessly.

And at this moment, an icy voice suddenly rang in the room.

"Are you someone who likes to roll about and mutter to yourself in someone else's house?"

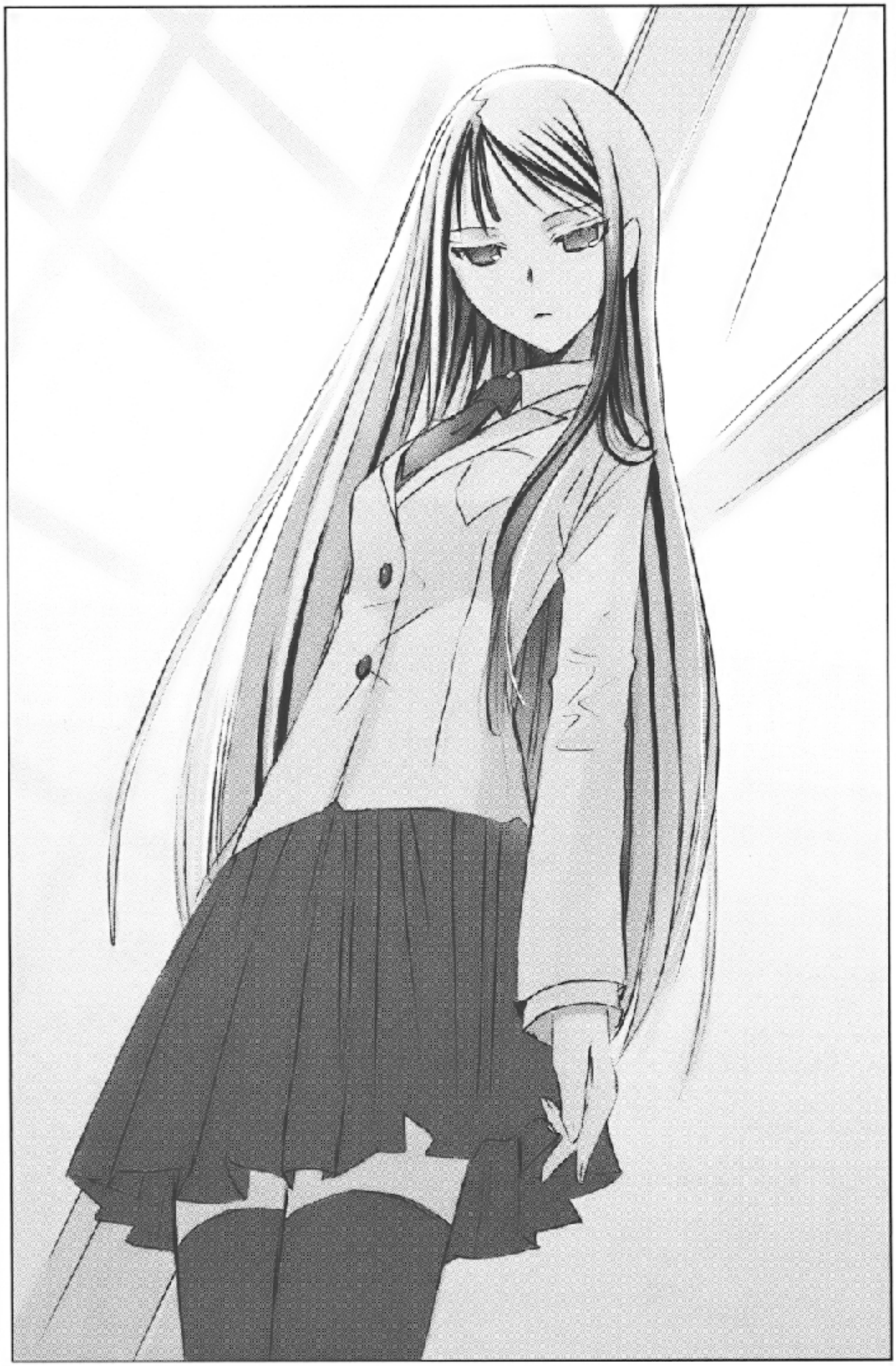
He got up in shock.

An icy cold stare was looking down on Koremitsu, and a tall girl with long radiant black hair was standing at the living room's door.

This person is—

She had an elegant-looking face, she had wise-looking lips, a clear pair of eyes, and remnants of her childhood look.

Most importantly, one could tell who she was from the depreciating look she gave at Koremitsu.



"Asa."

Hikaru called out the name that appeared in Koremitsu's mind.

So she's that Asai!

Hikaru's cousin, Aoi's close friend—

"You're Koremitsu Akagi from class 1-5, I presume?"

Asai said out Koremitsu's name as if she just uttered out something filthy.

The radiant black hair was in no way inferior to Aoi's as it dangled down her shoulders, but it had a different atmosphere from the latter. Asai was a lot mature than the tender Aoi, and there seemed to be a chilly atmosphere surrounding her.

Aoi's height was a little below the average for girls, while Asai herself was slightly taller. Both of them were slender, but Aoi's thinness gave a fragile vibe, and in contrast, Asai gave the feeling of being firm from head to toe.

This forceful attitude caused Koremitsu to feel nary a good vibe about her in this situation, and that she was a disgusting and snobbish woman.

Speaking of which, wasn't this Asai the one who calmed Aoi down and brought her away when the latter started the commotion at the funeral?

Koremitsu reminisced, getting up on his feet to glare back at Asai.

"So you're that Asa."

"I don't remember allowing you to call me by this name."

Unmoved, Asai coldly retorted.

"It can't be helped. I don't know your full name anyway."

"Asai Saiga."

"Is that so? Thank you for informing me. Now, why are you here?"

"I'm Hikaru's cousin, and I was requested by his father to clear up the stuff he left behind. The key's entrusted to me too."

Despite Koremitsu scanning her in a bad mood, Asai was not afraid at all, and she looked back at Koremitsu and said,

"Then, what about you? Why are you here? Mister Maezono actually opened the door for you. You look like a hoodlum with little verbal capacity, but you can talk, unexpectedly."

Koremitsu frowned unhappily.

Hikaru immediately tried to calm him down.

"Asa's trying to make you angry. Calm down and don't get caught in her pace."

Koremitsu immediately swallowed the words he wanted to utter out.

"I lent a book to Hikaru."

"Which book?"

"Proust's 'In the shadow of young girls in bloom'."

"Pr-Proust's 'In the shadow of young girls in bloom'."

Koremitsu answered as what Hikaru told him to, and Asai raised her eyebrows slightly.

"I've been reading his 'In Search of Lost Time', and just finished reading the first volume 'From Swann'. 'In the shadow of young girls in bloom' is the second volume."

"He just finished reading the first volume 'From Swann' of the ' In Search of Lost Time' series. He got attracted to Proust's work, and borrowed the second volume from me."

Upon hearing this, Asai's eyebrows twitched anxiously.

Koremitsu heaved a sigh of relief as he saw this reaction, but Asai pressed on.

"So that means you read through this 'In the shadow of Young Girls in bloom'. What kind of content does it have?"

Hey, what kind of story is it, Hikaru?

He gave Hikaru a look, but the latter answered in a troubled manner.

"I'm sorry, but I haven't had time to read it. I just left it alone as there were too many dates. But you see, this book looks like a theme that girls like, right? That's an 85% chance of it to be a love story, you know."

You idiot! What if it's not! Besides, why would you tell me the name of a book you've never read before?

As Koremitsu continued to ask Hikaru while giving several expressions, Asai asked further.

"What is it? Can't you answer?"

"It's a book belonging to a relative anyway. Who knows what it' s about?"

He protested to remove himself from the situation.

"And to whom, might I ask, does it belong?"

"What has the owner of the book got to do with you?"

"Calm down, Koremitsu. Asa's not waiting for an answer, but whether you're guilty."

Hikaru had already forewarned him, but Koremitsu, who gave a stiff expression as he stared into space, was deemed suspicious by Asai the moment he let out a trembling voice.

"Aren't you the uninvolved party here, Mr Akagi."

She sounded like a prosecutor interrogating a criminal.

"What do you mean?"

"I knew all about you approaching Aoi. How is it possible that you're Hikaru's friend? He doesn't have a male friend at all, not only within school, but also out of it."

"I'm his first friend."

"That's how you tricked Aoi, I suppose? Saying some stupid lie that Hikaru's presents are with you for the time being; you're the fourth one to pretend to comfort Aoi ever since Hikaru died. This caused Aoi to hate men all the more, and your method's the most stupid of them all."

"I said before that this isn't a mean to approach Aoi, and I'm not lying to her! Hikaru requested me to pass on his feelings to her."

"Hikaru's feelings…?"

Asai narrowed her eyes to a slit, and her icy stare was like a sharp blade.

Koremitsu felt a chill on his back.

There seemed to be a tranquil fury going on around her, and she spoke with a voice colder than before,

"Then tell me about it. I'll decide for myself whether these feelings are for Aoi to hear with my ears. Same for the presents; you'll have to get my approval if you want to give them to Aoi."

"But that will be meaningless! Hikaru requested me to pass them to Aoi, not you. I can only say those things to Aoi, and those presents are to go to her directly!"

He stared back at Asai as he concluded.

But the latter remained unmoved.

"Then, can you prove that these things you want to pass on really came from Hikaru?"

Koremitsu was speechless.

—You first entered school after Golden Week. Asa said it that you only appeared once in school before Hikaru's death, and that you can't possibly be Hikaru's friend.

"I remember very clearly on the day you entered school that the rumored infamous freshman arrived with a crutch and bandages, causing quite a commotion in school. Why is it that he would request you, a student like you with a notorious reputation, to pass on his feelings for Aoi?"

My reputation isn't for you to deal with. He muttered in his heart, but was unable to argue back.

That was because, if one were to consider this normally, it was impossible for Hikaru to request Koremitsu to present the presents to Aoi.

"And what exactly are Hikaru's feelings? Don't tell me Hikaru still likes Aoi? The way he likes girls is practically a disease now; he's certainly not a match for the pure Aoi, and he's been making her angry all this time."

These stated facts caused Koremitsu to be even more at a loss of words.

Hikaru too showed a troubled and stiff expression.

Damn it, how can I lose to you!?

"Yeah, Hikaru's one real playboy! He's a harem bastard alright! But he still loves Aoi! It's because there's nothing fake about his feelings that I want to pass them on to Aoi!"

Koremitsu raised his chin as he exclaimed, and in response, fufu , Asai snorted.

"What's so funny!"

"As expected—I can't believe that you're Hikaru's friend. That's because you're the complete opposite of him. Hikaru looks very carefree on the carefree, but he's very inexplicable within—a

complicated person who looks like he has something he wants to hide within. And you are gruff, simple-minded, savage-looking, and don't look smart. I suppose Hikaru is certainly dumber than I thought for choosing you to pass on these words."

"What did you say!"

Asai then concluded without mercy,

"It's impossible for you to express Hikaru's feelings."

She said with a heinous tone.

The smile had already disappeared off her face, and her icy cold expression ostensibly pierced through the heart as it fixated on Koremitsu.

It felt like she was saying: What can someone like you understand about Hikaru?

Anxiety rose up within him.

His head and ears were boiling, about to give off a shrill sound. Koremitsu yelled back, ostensibly trying to reflect Asai's expression,

"I'M HIKARU'S FRIEND! WE ONLY MET ONCE WHEN HE WAS ALIVE, BUT WE DID MEET DURING THOSE FEW MINUTES! AND THAT'S HOW WE BECAME FRIENDS!"

At first, they were merely ‘temporal’ friends.

Hikaru’s ghost haunted him, asking him to do all sorts of strange errands, and he felt frustrated by it.

Hikaru would follow him to the lavatory, to the bath, and would often say some teasing things that caused Koremitsu to once wish for him to disappear into heaven.

He was perverted, loves women, was a fanatic over flowers, and was a bastard who had a meaningful life in a completely different world from Koremitsu.

They would never understand each other, ever!

His stomach would itch unbearably whenever he lied that Hikaru was a friend.

But once he understood that Hikaru’s affections for Aoi were sincere, his view of Hikaru changed for the better to a small extent.

He felt that he should help Hikaru pass his feelings to Aoi.

After that, Koremitsu’s trauma awoke, and when he was sobbing and bawling his heart out, Hikaru was the one who comforted him.

Hikaru listened to his unreasonable grievances, accepted them, and even said some shallow words to motivate him.

Koremitsu knew that Hikaru would use a smile to express the pain of his loneliness.

So—now!

"Hikaru's a real friend of mine! I don't care if you're God or the president, I won't allow anyone to deny this! I can lift my chest and proclaim boldly to the entire world that Hikaru's an important friend of mine!"

Beside him, Hikaru's eyes widened upon hearing this.

Asai bit her lips tightly as she stared at Koremitsu coldly. A blue-white flame seemed to grow within her long narrow eyes.

"I'll definitely pass on that guy's feelings to Aoi! Just wait and see!"

He concluded with a determined will.

Asai replied calmly.

"You really annoy me to a point where I want to cut your mouth out with a chopper."

"What a coincidence. I'm infuriated to a point where I want to stuff your mouth and eyes with spice powder, but I've said what I wanted to say, and there's nothing left for me to say to you. I'm leaving."

After saying this, he head off to the corridor.

Asai remained silent.

Koremitsu was unable to tell what her expression was as he had his back turned against her, but he sensed that she was definitely staring at him.

He said to her without looking back,

"If you find this Prout's 'In the shadow of the young women in broom'—return it to me. That's gramps' book."

Once they left the apartment, Hikaru spoke up,

"Koremitsu…I'm sorry to say this, but the author's name is Proust, not Prout; and the name of the book isn't 'In the shadow of the young women in bloom', but 'In the shadow of the young girls in bloom'. And speaking of which, I think you just mispronounced 'bloom' as 'broom'."

"Ack! I messed up! To think I tried to act cool here, damn it!! How embarrassing!"

The sky was starting to darken.

Koremitsu grumbled on as he walked down the quiet road under the street lamps, lined with the park and library beside him.

"You told me to calm down, but I ended up yelling. I really could not take it."

"Yeah."

Don't agree to this without hesitation!!

He muttered in his heart.

"But I'm happy. You said to Asa that I'm a real friend of yours."

Koremitsu glanced aside at Hikaru, and saw him smiling back. The white street lamp shone upon his face, and his hair, eyes and lips were radiant.

He looked overly delighted, blissful, and his image as a pretty boy dazzled even more, causing Koremitsu to be at a loss of what to do.

"T-th-tha-that's because I was angered by that woman, so I accidentally…"

"Was that a lie?"

"No, that's not it. I really, thought of it this way. That's why I said it out…"

Upon hearing this, Hikaru felt all the more delighted.

Ahh, don't show that expression. My ears are going to let out steam now.

"I suddenly feel like shouting now, okay? Others can't hear me even if I shout out now."

"Eh, oi—"

Koremitsu wanted to stop Hikaru, but he had already started yelling.

"KOREMITSU AKAGI IS MY FRRRIIIEEEENNNNDDDDD!!! WE' RE FRRRIIIEEEENNNNDDDDDSSSSS!!!"

"Shu-shut it, you!? It's embarrassing!"

"FRRRIIIEEEENNNNDDDDDSSSSS! KOREMITSU AND I ARE REAL FRRRIIIEEEENNNNDDDDDSSSSS!!!"

"Shut up! I told you to shut up!"

Koremitsu's face and head were about to boil in heat. Someone - anyone - please stop this drunkard!

"FRRRIIIEEEENNNNDDDDDSSSSS! WE'RE REAL FRRRIIIEEEENNNNDDDDDSSSSS!!!"

"Ah, right. We're not temporary ones, but real friends. You had enough? Stop yelling. Please, stop it already!"

Koremitsu knew that nobody around them could hear it, but he was utterly embarrassed to near death.

Hikaru himself however probably felt relieved by this as he yelled all he wanted. "FRIENDS! WE'RE FRIENDS!" after this, he swapped his words,

"I LOVE MISS AOOOIII!!"

He yelled delightedly.

"I WON'T CHEAT ON HER ANYMORE~!!!"

"I'LL TREASURE MISS AOI WHOLEHEARTEDLY~!"

Hikaru looked up at the night sky with a dazzling expression in the middle of the road as he yelled out with his sweet voice.

Perhaps he was overjoyed, to a point where even Koremitsu was affected by him.

"Oh! I'll bear witness!"

He raised his right hand forcefully.

"I too won't lose to Asai Saiga! I'll definitely pass on your feelings to Aoi."

"Okay and once the birthday presents are given to Aoi, let's go get some girls."

"Wait, didn't you say you're going to be devoted to Aoi only? Why are you changing your mind so quickly?"

"But it's not about me, but about getting a girl that matches you, Koremitsu. I've decided! I'll get a girl who can really laugh for you."

His eyes were bubbly, and he sounded really excited.

"Aren't those women who like to laugh very noisy?"

"*That kind of woman is suited for you. She'll laugh for you too, and you'll feel like laughing whenever you're with her.*"

"I can't imagine that."

"*I can even hear your delighted laughter, Koremitsu.*"

"That's definitely your hallucination."

The surroundings were filled with utter silence.

There was only one shadow cast onto the ground, but even so, the two good friends walked side by side under the sky dyed a thin black in nature's ink as the stars began twinkling on their way home.

"*Hey, Koremitsu, do you know where people go after they die?*"

Hikaru asked in a sprightly manner.

"Who knows? I never died before."

"*I think they go to space.*"

"Space?"

"*Right.*"

Hikaru lifted his head.

And Koremitsu too looked up at the sky.

In the blurry black sky, the little stars were twinkling.

Their lights were weak, but they were certainly twinkling.

This was the night sky of a city.

"See, don't they say that people become stars when they die? The souls that leave the human bodies will leave Earth and enter space. Also, since the consciousness exists in an infinite space, souls can fly about freely. The stars we see might be the souls of the departed."

Hikaru's voice was soft, yet still very clear.

His meditative expression looking up to the sky shone a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

Koremitsu felt the onset of tears welling up.

"I'll head to space one of these days."

Upon hearing Hikaru's words, Koremitsu was assailed by an inflow of emotions.

"When the time comes, you'll definitely be bawling your heart out."

"I-I won't cry, idiot."

He glared back with his burning face to deny this, and Hikaru returned Koremitsu with a happy expression.

"Un, that will be better. I hope you'll send me off with a smile."

He spoke ever-clearly.

"It's a promise, Koremitsu. Bid me farewell with your best smile when I head for space."

Koremitsu's whole body felt immobilized.

One of these days, Hikaru would leave Earth for space.

Until the day when his wish would be fulfilled—

Idiot…don't make me sad now. Look at our current situation here. We finally became friends, you know.

He spoke to himself in his mind, but was unable to say it aloud, and talked about something else with a serious expression,

"I say, stop making empty promises like this. The way you go about doing this, you definitely have some promise with another girl."

"It's not a random promise. I'll only honor important promises."

"Don't tell me your dating plan is an important promise too!?"

"Of course. This is a very important promise for me."

"I never asked to come along and do that."

"Then let's make an appointment first."

"No appointments."

"How petty. Aren't we friends?"

"Even if we're friends, no way."

"You're really strict."

Hikaru shrugged his shoulders.

"Speaking of which, when you met me in the beginning, I think you said something about 'there's something I want to ask of you or something'."

"Ah, about that…"

Hikaru stared afar and smiled.

"It's okay."

"Hey, what's with that little chuckle? Now I'm curious. Tell me."

"I'll say it if you're willing to go dating."

"What kind of request is that!?"

"Then what do you want to do?"

"Ugh, you're really despicable. Besides, how are you going to date when you're dead?"

Unaware of it, the pair had strolled through the riverside lane leading to the school.

Blades of grass on the campus lawn quivered under the nightly breeze, glistening verdantly in moonlit reflection.

The river flowed calmly, and there was a sweet fragrance lingering about the moist air.

Under the starry night sky, they both continued to tease one another as they walked on.

Just like companions with ten years' friendship shared -

Chapter 5 - Her Lies and Truths

"Listen up, we still have three days 'til Aoi's birthday. It's Saturday tomorrow, so today will be the big day. Let's buck up."

"Right, Koremitsu."

The following morning, a Friday, Koremitsu enthusiastically departed from his home. He disembarked at his bus stop and went along the path leading to school.

"Asa might be planning something to deal with us."

Hikaru spoke worriedly.

"She gives off this vibe that makes her seem black-hearted, and her glare has weight to it. I guess she might be some boss commanding delinquents to do dangerous things or something."

"I-I can't really deny it completely, but."

"Are you serious!? She's the mastermind?"

"Probably not to that extent…yeah…"

Hikaru stumbled over his words.

"But Asa is a strong and wise person. She's a lone child, so she treats Aoi like she's her little sister. She often says I'm insincere to Aoi. She likes to help others, and is very understanding."

"I say, aren't you too protective of girls. Tch—wait, don't tell me you dated that damn arrogant woman too?"

Hikaru merely answered a startled Koremitsu's question composedly.

"Nope. Even if I'm the only man left in this world, Asa won't go out with me. Even if the world's about to end, we won't be together."

His voice was delicate yet unyielding.

"AKAGI—!!"

Koremitsu looked to the source of the voice and saw Honoka dashing toward him, entirely unconcerned about her disheveled skirt and tousled hair.

Her eyes were wide, and she scowled; she showed both her slight anger, and her fragility. She abruptly took hold of Koremitsu 's hand.

"Wha-what are you doing, Shikibu?"

"Thank goodness. You're alright!"

"Huh? What are you saying?"

"I called you so many times, but you didn't pick up your phone, so I was worried about you…"

"Phone?"

Koremitsu rummaged through his bag for his phone and found there were more than 10 missed calls from Honoka.

Such a long queue of incoming calls was new to him.

"Oh, I switched it off."

"What kind of explanation is that?!"

Honoka's eyebrows rose slightly.

"Well, actually, hardly anyone called me before."

"Then why did you have a phone in the first place? Don't you know how I felt when I called you—uuu?"

"What happened?"

Koremitsu asked dazedly; Honoka looked to him and answered with a grimace.

"The Matriarch Asa asked me about you yesterday."

"Matriarch Asa?"

"President Saiga."

"Saiga? Ahh, Asa, so she's the president, huh?"

"A-Asa! You called the president Asa—!?"

Honoka was stupefied.

“What’s she shocked about?”

Koremitsu could not comprehend the situation, and glanced aside at Hikaru, who seemed to empathize with her as he shrugged his shoulders.

However, this reaction confused Koremitsu all the more.

Koremitsu, not having the ability to comprehend the situation, glanced aside to Hikaru. His empathetic feelings toward Honoka were apparent, and he shrugged his shoulders. This served only to intensify Koremitsu’s bewilderment.

Honoka precipitously clasped Koremitsu’s collar and pulled him to her.

She pouted, her cheeks puffed out, and stared at Koremitsu.

“Really, don’t you~ understand the situation at all? If we’re talking about this Asai Saiga, the Matriarch Asa of the Second Year , we’ll be talking about the student council president of the high school department. Also, she was already the student council president in both elementary school and middle school! She’s of the top class elite among the ‘nobles’ here, one with extreme power . It’s said that even teachers don’t dare defy her.”

Honoka furiously described a rumor stating that an employee of the administration branch once defied Asai and was transferred out, and another explaining how a particular teacher, dissatisfied

with Asai's behavior, 'resigned' less than half a semester into the school year.

"Instead of calling them close friends—you might say that the president Saiga is like a guardian to Her Highness Aoi, and it seemed that all the boys who want to approach Her Highness Aoi were monitored by her. The president had a calm expression when she was asking me about you, but her eyes were really cold, and it really scared me…she definitely had her sights on you because you wouldn't let go of Her Highness Aoi. You wouldn't pick up the phone when I called you, so I thought you…"

Koremitsu regarded Honoka's eyelashes - tears of uncertainty clung to them in spite of their feisty image.

…Why does she look so agitated and desperate?

Koremitsu had never before been so close to a girl, and an abnormal feeling came over him.

"Miss Shikibu's worried about you. Such a good girl."

Hikaru vocalized this daintily.

"I see, so you're worried about me? Thanks."

Not a second after the words left his lips, Honoka's face was flushed red. She loosened her hands from his shirt with an impressive swiftness.

"Wh-wha-what are you saying!? Who's worried about you here …you're just someone who can get up even being kicked a hundred times. I just got provoked by president Saiga and advised you; nope, not worried about you at all—I'm just scared of getting involved because she thinks I'm your accomplice—"

She turned from him and spoke harshly.

"Miss Shikibu sure is cute."

Koremitsu, who watched Hikaru as he snickered, was perplexed.

"Anyway, you'd better comply for the time being."

"That's impossible. We just had an argument yesterday."

"HUH!?"

Honoka turned back to Koremitsu; her eyes were opened wide, and her exaggerated expression was befitting of a comedian.

"We met each other on the way home, and she bossed me around as if she were important. I lost my temper, and shouted ' Who would listen to you, you bastard?'."

"Why did you say that—!?"

Her gaze fell as she shouted.

"It can't be helped. I couldn't back down in that situation."

Koremitsu's answer came through pouted lips.

"You're really an idi—"

"If Saiga tries doing anything, I'll protect you."

Idiot—before Honoka could finish her sentence, she was, for some reason, rooted to the spot.

Blood rushed to her face; both her ears and her neck were crimson. She averted her gaze from Koremitsu.

What's going on? What's with her? Why's her face blushing?

"Koremitsu, you don't have the right to call me a playboy. You do have talent."

Hikaru babbled.

What nonsense are you spouting? Koremitsu thought in protest, but he repressed these words to hear Honoka's response.

"You-you idiot! You don't have to worry about me. I'll protect myself. Humph, don't look down on me. I-I-I-I-I-I don't need your help, humph."

She exclaimed this with her eyes moving about rapidly.

"Really—now's not the time to worry about others. You don't understand your own situation. Why are you acting cool, saying that you will pro-protect me or something…no, my face is all heated up. Everyone's looking at us!"

Koremitsu, after he had recovered, found that there was truth in Honoka's words; the students gave them surprised looks as they passed by.

"Keep your distance from me when you're talking. I don't want to be misunderstood for going to school with a delinquent."

Honoka shied away, hiding her flushed, petite face, speeding ahead of Koremitsu.

"I'M NOT A DELINQUENT!"

"DON'T TALK TO ME!"

Honoka further increased the distance between them.

"Ugh, I really don't understand women—"

He thought she was worried for him because of the way she approached him, but she became angry without explanation; she would go on to blush and her expression would be, for a moment, vulnerable. The next moment, she was bitter once more; her moody vacillations were too rapid.

Koremitsu followed Honoka, a distance of several meters between the two, with Hikaru's enthusiastic chatter coming from his side.

"Miss Shikibu sure is cute. Her feisty personality and innocence is the best combination. She's so adorable. You should now go forward, grab her hand and say 'I want to go to school with you'. She'll blush even harder, this Miss Shikibu. Ahh, I really want to see this."

Seriously, you…what about Aoi?

Koremitsu glanced to Hikaru condescendingly.

Really, what am I getting all flustered for?

Honoka hurried onward, her heart in total disarray.

My face is definitely all red now.

The previous day, when Asai Saiga had summoned Honoka to the student council room, she'd thoroughly questioned Honoka about Koremitsu.

Because you seem close to him, Miss Shikibu—she said.

Her beautiful eyes emanated a pressure that made Honoka shudder in consternation.

"Akagi may look like a delinquent, but he's really a serious and hardworking guy, and he really devotes himself fully to the girl he likes!

He won't be violent to girls—and he's definitely a gentleman! He likes cats—I don't know whether that's true or not, but he's articulate, and he'll finish his assignments seriously—"

If Honoka were to defend Koremitsu, she would surely be deemed an accomplice. To make Asai her enemy would be foolish.

She understood this, but could not restrain herself.

"Koremitsu Akagi is a decent man who looks much better than his appearance!"

Why in the world did I say something like that? The president didn't say anything after hearing it. It's really scary.

Regardless,

"If there's nothing else, I'll make my leave."

She spoke courageously and took her leave.

I can't believe I actually did that.

Her actions were ludicrous; she had taunted the Matriarch Asa.

She was in no place to call Koremitsu an idiot.

The president won't hold back now, no matter what. If she does anything to me…

"I'll protect you."

She recalled his words, the serious expression on his face, and her own searing face. She had never expected a hero's line to cross over from a love story into reality.

"I'll protect—."

UWWAAAAHHH. NO! DON'T!

She reached the corridor, perturbed.

Huh?

Honoka noticed something unusual.

There was a crowd in the corridor.

The girls, their eyes filled with tears, said things like, "This is too much," and "Who did this?"

What happened?

She hurriedly changed her shoes, and walked toward the crowd .

"Hono."

Her braided friend, among others, greeted her.

"What happened, Michiru?"

Michiru glowered as she muttered.

"It's too much—someone cut the little papers stuck beside Lord Hikaru's news bulletin—"

Honoka turned her attention to the bulletin board.

The colored papers, full of memorial notes and messages to Hikaru Mikado, had large crosses carved into them.

What is this?

Koremitsu stood at the hind of the crowd, his demeanor especially serious. He stared at the news bulletin and the colored papers.

The bulletin and papers had crosses hacked into them.

"Thank you."

"Farewell."

"I love you the most."

The words, etched across shredded papers in black ink, hung alongside Hikaru's picture.

Koremitsu looked breathlessly to Hikaru, who was staring at the notes written for him which were now covered in large crosses.

What exactly is going on? Who did it?

Koremitsu pushed his way through the crowd, moving onward.

Those who saw Koremitsu's stiff, vicious countenance shrunk away from him.

A path opened before him, and his surroundings calmed. With the crowd spectating him, he drew near the bulletin board and came to a still.

He stared at the notes and colored papers with pursed lips.

They were probably sliced through with a penknife. The surface was not jagged, but very neat.

The resemblance between these crosses and the cross drawn on that canvas weighed on his heart.

Two blacks lines jutting across the sunlight-filled stairs.

Two black lines.

He felt the sliced surface of the notes with his frigid fingers, and a small object fell from inside the envelope and landed atop his right foot.

"?"

He knelt to retrieve it. It was a small silver star, half the size of a grain of rice.

Hikaru leaned in to examine it.

"This is…"

Just as he began to speak.

"Akagi."

Koremitsu turned to the voice and saw a rigid looking male teacher, a young female homeroom teacher beside him.

The homeroom teacher stood tentatively, but the venerable male teacher spoke firmly,

"Please, come with us."

He could tell by the homeroom teacher's troubled demeanor and the male teacher's stern voice that there was no good to come of it.

"This is the Teaching Staff Head, Mister Nishidera."

Hikaru spoke with a tense voice,

Koremitsu's voice followed,

"Oh."

With that as their answer, they followed the department head.

Spectators' curious stares prodded them like needles.

Koremitsu, from the corner of his eye, saw Honoka worriedly watching him depart.

"Is he the culprit? He's already been called over to the office by the Department Head, you know?"

Behind them, such chatter could be heard.

"A student stood up as witness, saying that you were the one who sliced the colored paper with a knife."

He was led to the cramped counseling room, and the Teaching Staff Head spoke chidingly from across the conference table.

"Haa? Who?"

The words drained and stunned him.

The Teaching Staff Head spoke sternly,

"I can't tell you who they were, but there were three students, not one, who reported you, saying that they personally saw you cutting the colored papers with a knife."

What the!?

He came to a sudden realization.

Saiga did this, didn't she?

If she had not, why would three people have testified to witnessing him cut the notes when he was innocent?

Honoka said before that President Saiga would not forgive her enemies, and that all the students who opposed the president vanished for no reason.

Honoka had previously stated that President Saiga was unforgiving, and that all the students to oppose her had vanished with no ostensible reason.

Damn, this is too despicable, Asai Saiga. Is it your modus operandi to frame people?

His face stiffened, and his chest boiled.

Hikaru, after taking note of Koremitsu's twitching eyebrows and fury filled eyes, offered some advice.

"You didn't do this, Koremitsu. I can vouch for you since I'm with you twenty-four hours a day, so please calm down. Just hold on for now and listen to the Teaching Staff Head."

Koremitsu took a breath to calm himself.

Were it not for Hikaru's avocation, the situation would have worsened.

He probably would have shouted for the Teaching Staff Head to bring in both the students who framed him and the student council president, Saiga.

"I didn't do this."

He concluded as he stared at the Teaching Staff Head.

Both teachers, the Teaching Staff Head and the homeroom teacher, were slightly taken aback by his calm denial.

"But I heard that you yelled at the students sticking their notes on the board a few days ago, didn't you?"

"Well…I wasn't yelling at them, and I have nothing to do with this."

"So, you mean that the witnesses were mistaken."

"I don't know since I'm not them, but I know all too well what I did yesterday. I left school before the final dismissal time, so if they really saw the culprit, it wasn't me. Besides, I wouldn't do that kind of thing anyway."

"Then, is there anyone who can prove that you left school at that time."

"I met President Saiga when I went over to Hikaru's apartment. The president should be able to prove it."

The name alone caused him vexation.

He tried his best to suppress the rage which rose in his chest as he spoke, but the Teaching Staff Head gave an arrogant look at Koremitsu, and said without wavering,

"I've already asked Saiga about that."

What?

"You called yourself Hikaru Mikado's friend, but were infuriated when Saiga pointed out that it was impossible."

That was truly the case.

It sounded like Koremitsu was lying about being Hikaru's friend, and was a lunatic with an inability to differentiate between fantasy and reality. Saiga definitely implied this when she spoke with the Teaching Staff Head.

"Maybe it was because you were overly excited that she was worried that you might do something overboard. She said you might have returned to school after that, and that you had enough time for you to do something like this."

"Wha—"

WHAT KIND OF JOKE IS THIS!? He nearly exploded.

"Hang in there, Koremitsu!"

Hikaru restrained him.

"I get it, I get it, okay?"

He managed to calm himself, but his heart was racing, and his head was seething.

His breathing was erratic.

The Teaching Staff Head and the homeroom teacher were probably taken aback by his the fury displayed in his eyes and breathlessness as they froze.

"I didn't—do it. Hikaru's my friend; I won't tear messages meant for a friend."

His voice growled with fury, and his throat was burning.

"You really didn't do this?"

The Teaching Staff Head asked again in an irked manner, and Koremitsu nearly lost his temper, but was stopped again by Hikaru.

"Never."

The Teaching Staff Head sighed and said,

"I'll talk with you again once I talk with Asai."

Koremitsu was finally liberated, and the bell indicating the end of the first period rang.

"I heard that Akagi was summoned to the staff room by the Teaching Staff Head because he was the one who cut the news and the colored paper ."

"So that delinquent did it after all."

"I've already thought about it. His facial expression was exaggerated when he roared at the girls on the corridor. He had that scary expression on his face this morning too."

"How can be possibly be Lord Hikaru's friend? They're so different it's like a Prince and a slave."

"Yeah, nobody will believe him—"

"Speaking of which, I think he attended the funeral?"

"He was. So what? He's a ghost stalker? He definitely cut the papers because he was angry about everyone ignoring him when he said he was Lord Hikaru's friend."

"He's the worst."

These ramblings, and others like it, came from in front of him.

"Tch! That damned woman…I won't forgive you, Asai Saiga."

He gritted his teeth and walked through the corridor to the classroom.

She framed me as the vandal, so I'm completely isolated, but she's too naïve. I was already isolated. I'm already used to such slander.

"…Did Asa really do this?"

Beside him, Hikaru closed his eyes slightly and muttered pensively.

"Doing this isn't Asa's style."

"What are you saying?"

Koremitsu spoke softly.

It seemed like something that cold-blooded woman would do, but Hikaru's normally clear face was clouded.

"It's Asa's style to frame you as the culprit, Koremitsu, but…the one who cut the news and papers might be someone else. Asa simply used it to her advantage."

"Someone else…"

"Because if Asa knew who did this, she definitely wouldn't slander you, definitely not. Asa wouldn't do such a dangerous thing."

The fervor in Hikaru's eyes was quickly fading to nonexistence.

He seemed to be entirely preoccupied by himself, ruminating for an answer; his icy countenance that of a complete stranger to Koremitsu.

For Hikaru's face to bear anything but a smile was disconcerting to Koremitsu, and when he recalled the cross drawn on that canvas, his chest ached as though it were being torn.

Honoka ran to him.

"Akagi, are you alright?"

She looked to be a combination of flustered and worried as she looked up to Koremitsu.

"Yeah."

He answered.

"Did the Teaching Staff Head look for you?"

"He asked if I was the culprit, but I didn't do anything."

He was still furious with Asai and the Teaching Staff Head, but he gave his best apathetic look as to not worry Honoka; however, he still had the face of a scoundrel.

Honoka pouted her lips in an ostensibly embarrassed manner.

"Is, is that so. So nothing happened."

She muttered coldly."

"Why are you talking with the delinquent Akagi, Shikibu?"

"How disappointing. To think that you became a delinquent too, Shikibu."

Koremitsu heard some people mutter,

And at the next moment, he bellowed,

"ALRIGHT, THAT GUY WHO SAID DELINQUENT! YOU CAN CALL ME ONE, BUT SHIKIBU'S NOT ONE!"

"What are you doing, Akagi—"

Honoka's eyes widened, and she tried to stop Koremitsu.

Hikaru, who was immersed in his own thoughts, hurriedly advised Koremitsu too,

"Koremitsu, it's like you to be angry for Miss Shikibu. You'll cause trouble for her too if you exacerbate things further!"

"…"

Koremitsu immediately stopped him.

"What's he doing? Being angry back at us?"

"He's the culprit who cut the paper on Lord Hikaru's bulletin."

Other voices rang, and Koremitsu clenched his trembling fist as his temple veins were about to explode.

At this moment,

"That's not true. He's not the one who cut the papers and the news cutting!"

Koremitsu doubted his eyes and ears.

Hikaru too stood there, unmoving.

The one exclaiming with a pale face was Aoi.

Why would Aoi!?

Koremitsu held his breath, and Aoi's voice continued to ring.

"No! he didn't do it...! It's not him. It's not him!"

Her trembling tender body was ostensibly about to snap, and her eyes were filled with anguish as she kept telling them.

Her pale face and straight flowing black hair was all messy.

Her voice was becoming weaker, and she cuddled herself, seemingly chilly, and lowered her head.

The second lesson bell rang coldly across the silent corridor.

Koremitsu's arms were slumped weakly as he stood there, and he immediately had the image of the large cross on the canvas and Aoi drawing it in his mind.

During lunch break, while Koremitsu went to the roof with bento in stow, he heard rumors about the slashing.

"I heard that it was Lord Hikaru's fiancée who did it."

"Her Highness Aoi did belittle Lord Hikaru a long time ago, and even on that day…"

Hikaru, who was beside Koremitsu, remained silent with a stiff expression.

They arrived at the room, and Koremitsu sat his buttocks down with his legs outstretched.

"What do you think? Did Aoi really do it?"

He whispered hesitantly,

"I don't know. But Miss Aoi does have a motive."

He frowned as he answered painfully.

Aoi did not say that she was the one who cut the paper, but the 'it's not him' line from her sounded like she was trying to shield Koremitsu, or rather, she might be guilty over her crime.

If Aoi was really the one who cut it all, who knows how cruel it'll be to Hikaru…?

What would he have to do about the birthday presents he promised to give Aoi on Sunday? Hikaru's expression was all gloomy, and Koremitsu was at a loss of words.

Damn it. I might as well be the culprit!

Frustrated, he bit into the extremely large Inarizushi[11].

Suddenly, something glittered beside Koremitsu.

"!"

And then, a chime rang, and a girl aimed her camera right in front of him.

She had tomboyish short hair, and though she had a petite physique, her silky thighs and the protruding chest on her shirt made her bewitching.

"Sorry, Akagi! Can I have a photo please? From this direction."

She immediately darted in front of him without his permission, and her cellphone screen flashed again. A cackling sound rang, indicating that the photo shoot was done.

"What are you doing!?"

"Hello, I'm Hiina Oumi of the news club, the second girl in class 1-4. My blood type is AB, birthday is February 3rd, Aquarius. As for my tastes in boyfriends, I like the intellectual kind with glasses on. I'm willing to do anything to get a quick breaking scoop, whether it's to wear a school swimsuit, cat-ears or clean the toilet. My favorite food is pasta, and I prefer to sprinkle lots of cheese over it rather than have the Neapolitan meat sauce on it. I think it's best to have Neapolitan pasta with cheese right? There's a café called 'April Fools' in front of the station, and including coffee, red tea, herbal tea or their homemade mint ice-cream, the entire set is worth 850 Yen. That's really the best one for me. Are there any other questions?"

She was speaking very quickly midway through, but the final few words were too faster that Koremitsu's mind was utterly confused.

Wearing a school swimsuit, cleaning the toilet, or whatever, what was going on? No, before that.

"Why did you take a photo of me when I haven't allowed you to?"

And in this situation?

He glared back like a beast, but the girl did not seem to mind.

"I did ask if I could take a photo."

"But I didn't allow you to."

"Well, let's not fuss over such trivial stuff. Now, the topic of our scoop, Akagi, you're Lord Hikaru's friend, right?"

"So what?"

She would probably say something like she could not believe it.

"I'm investigating into something regarding Lord Hikaru. Thus, I'm collecting all sorts of information."

"You're still going to write a Hikaru's memoriam during this commotion again?"

"Ahh, you sure were unlucky this morning, Akagi, weren't you ? But I have no intention of focusing on this trivial matter of someone's act of personal revenge. Well, a coming-out party from Her Highness Aoi certainly is exciting, but this is really a 3rd-rate act. What I'm looking into is the issue of 'The truth behind Lord Hikaru's death', that's all."

"The truth, behind Hikaru's death?"

As Koremitsu remained puzzled, Hiina grinned as she said,

"It's just…a little rumor—but Lord Hikaru didn't die from an accident, but was actually killed by someone."

"!"

Koremitsu let out a slight gasp.

Was Hikaru possibly killed by someone?

What's going on, Hikaru!?

He turned to the man himself, and saw Hikaru give a grim frozen expression into the sky that could have frozen the atmosphere around them. Hikaru bit on his lips that were usual smiling gently, his face was face and his eyes were sharp.

Koremitsu immediately had goosebumps.

Was she telling the truth?

"Hello there, Akagi? Why are you looking behind?"

As Hiina called out to Koremitsu.

"So you're here, Akagi!"

Honoka opened the door to the roof, and she exclaimed with a tone of desperation.

"What is it, Shikibu!?"

"Her Highness Aoi's in trouble! She's taken away by Lord Hikaru's fans! The situation is very bad!"

"Aoi!"

Hikaru exclaimed.

"Ahh, Her Highness Aoi had been badmouthing Lord Hikaru up till now, making his fans really unhappy. With this incident, it' ll be past their breaking point."

Hiina said this rather expectantly. Koremitsu left his bento behind and ran over to Honoka.

"Where did they go, Shikibu?"

"To the woods!"

Koremitsu dashed hurriedly down the stairs.

"Ah! Wait a moment! Akagi! I haven't had my material yet—!"

Hiina chased after him with her chest bouncing about.

You'd better not have anything happen to you, Aoi!

He did not expect to see students being called out for personal revenge in this prestigious school of princesses and young lords. If women were to get hysterical, who knew what they could do.

As Koremitsu sprinted down the stairs, Hikaru exclaimed climatically,

"Listen to me, Koremitsu. I feel that Miss Aoi's not the one who cut the paper. She may have a 'motive' for doing this, but it's not her character to actually 'carry out the act'. Of course, it's not Asa too. Even if Asa knows that Miss Aoi drew a cross on her canvas, she won't suspect Miss Aoi."

Koremitsu darted through the corridor and ran out of the school building without changing out of his shoes. During this time, Hikaru continued with a serious expression,

"That's right, Asa definitely didn't know that Miss Aoi drew a cross on the canvas. That's why, when there was the slashing incident, she felt that it could be used to her benefit, and she could frame you for this incident."

Koremitsu panted, looked around, and ran straight to the woods.

Hikaru's voice got more uptight,

"The crux in this situation is why the culprit would deliberately draw a large cross on the memorial. If it's not a coincidence—there has to be

an intention behind this, and the culprit will show up. Miss Aoi's not the culprit, and it's not Asa. That means—"

A voice rang, sounding like it ripped through the air sharply,

"You're just betrothed because your parents decided the marriage!"

He turned his head towards where the voice came from, and saw Aoi standing with her back against a large trunk. She bit her lips tightly, and she was frowning with a pale face.

There were approximately 10 girls surrounding her.

And they were ostensibly taking turns to tell her off.

"Even if you weren't loved by Lord Hikaru, it's embarrassing that you still hate him after his death and rip the papers!"

"Lord Hikaru certainly is pitiful to have a vicious woman like you as his fiancée. No wonder he went to flirt around.

No matter how much she was scolded, Aoi kept silent with a stiff expression. Her eyes were showing a firm glint, and her tightly shut lips were not saying a single word.

"What are you staring at? Say something? Are you looking down on us because you think you're a 'noble' who's been in the school since kindergarten?"

The girl who was irate by Aoi's attitude raised her hand.

"I've always disliked you for a long time."

Koremitsu sprinted over as he hollered,

"HOLD IT RIGHT THERE—!"

Aoi widened her eyes.

And the other girls looked over at Koremitsu.

Koremitsu barged his way amongst them and stood in front of Aoi, shielding her.

"Don't you lay a hand on her! She's a very important person! If you want to vent your anger, come at me! I'll take a beating from you for her sake."

Right! Aoi's a very important person to Hikaru. That's why I have to protect her!

Upon seeing the savage-looking Koremitsu with messy red hair pant as he hollered, the girls were rooted to the ground in fear.

"COME HIT ME!"

Koremitsu roared out at girl who raised her hand.

"Wha-what are you doing? Didn't she completely ignore you, splash you with the paintbrush water, and cut up the papers everyone wrote to Lord Hikaru? And you still want to protect her after all this? Are you an idiot?"

The girl glared timidly at Koremitsu.

At this moment,

Hikaru, who was beside them, spoke sternly,

"No, Miss Aoi didn't do it."

Koremitsu immediately turned towards Hikaru.

Hikaru's expression was as firm as his will, unfettered, and he looked towards the girls surrounding Aoi.

They could not see Hikaru.

And they could not hear his voice.

But Koremitsu could hear him.

That was why,

"Miss Aoi isn't the one who cut the colored papers and the news."

That was why he had to convey Hikaru's words.

He had to protect this Aoi Hikaru so loved.

The girls widened their eyes in shock, and Aoi, standing behind him, was taken aback.

Hikaru looked like an Archangel sent down by God as he pointed a long finger at one of the girls.

"You're—the culprit."

"You're the one who did this."

Koremitsu grabbed the hand of the girl Hikaru pointed to and raised it up.

"No!"

The girl who had been hounding Koremitsu up till this point let out a soft cry.

Honoka gasped, and Hiina took her phone out as she got ready.

The polished nail on the right hand's finger dropped as Koremitsu grabbed it, and the stars and flower shaped glass fragments were glittering.

They were the same stars as the ones that dropped onto Koremitsu's toes.

Hikaru spoke quietly,

"Why are there large crosses on the news and the papers—as for what this means, it means that the culprit was definitely in the arts room, and

saw Miss Aoi draw the cross on the canvas. She did not like Miss Aoi, and did this to push the blame on her."

Koremitsu digested the meaning of Hikaru's words as he growled,

"You're from the arts club, right? You saw me being scolded by Aoi, and also saw her draw that large cross on the canvas. That's why you deliberately cut the news and papers in large crosses to shift the suspicion to her."

The girl grabbed by the hand froze tersely, and then struggled like a fish biting on hook, trying to break free from Koremitsu's hand. But once she knew she could not escape, her expression contorted, and she looked like she was hoping for Koremitsu not to speak on any further.

"Tha-that's because…I couldn't forgive her."

The girl showed fear and apprehension on her face as she moved her dry lips.

"That person kept calling Lord Hikaru useless, a scum amongst men, and even said something like he deserved this for what he did."

Her tentative-looking eyes had anger and sadness as she said ' this person', and she growled these words.

"Wh-when Lord Hikaru was around, I couldn't approach him because I was too nervous…but that person, even when she

became Lord Hikaru's fiancée so easily, said such…such overboard things—if I were her, I would have ripped my mouth out and not say anything…if I were Lord Hikaru's fiancée, I'll definitely treasure him more than that person. I'll thank God every day…but this person keeps deriding him, and she's his fiancée."

When she finally finished, she broke down in tears.

Koremitsu weakened, not knowing what to do.

When Aoi drew the large cross on the canvas, Koremitsu too could not suppress his anger as he roared out at Aoi.

He understood all too well the feelings of the girl Aoi hurt.

Koremitsu let go of her hand, and she immediately knelt down, her skirt lying on the grassy patchy as she sobbed weakly.

"Lord Hikaru, has always been my idol. I was satisfied with just looking at him from afar, but he's now dead…I won't…won't be able to see him again…"

Hikaru too showed a depressed look, and got down on his knees to clasp the girl's hands, seemingly apologizing for not being able to accept her feelings.

"I-I'm sorry."

Even though the one she hoped to meet was standing right in front of her, she could not sense him clasping her hand, and she continued while sobbing.

"I already knew…this is just envy on my part…but…it's really painful…I couldn't control myself…I'm sorry…I'm sorry."

The other girls too apologized as they lowered their heads.

"I'm sorry."

"Pl-please forgive me."

Koremitsu, who was already apprehensive over being apologized at, had sweat dripping as his head started to heat up as he shouted,

"Idiots! Don't apologize to me or anything! You shouldn't have done this if you had known that you're going to apologize like this !"

Suddenly, a hoarse voice came from behind.

"…Is that so."

Aoi, standing behind Koremitsu, continued to mutter.

"…Please don't…do this too. Please don't…apologize."

He turned around, and saw Aoi's expression look paler than before. Her eyes were shut, and she seemed to be writhing as she breathed.

"I…wasn't the one who cut the papers, but…I already thought about it."

Startled, Koremitsu's voice was stuck in his throat. Hiina watched on with a calm expression, Honoka and the other girls shocked onlookers.

And then, there was a color tint of agony spreading in Hikaru's eyes. For every moment Aoi spoke, her petite shoulders would tremble, and the agony got concentrated.

"As you have said, Hikaru never loved me. He was chasing other girls…and I despised him for it. He fooled people like that, and died in that manner…he didn't consider the feelings of others until the end."

Aoi suddenly could not continue any further. Her contorted expression showed that she was about to cry, and she had already revealed the sadness and bitterness within.

"I always thought of tearing down those colored papers so that I won't have to remember them…whenever I see those things related to Hikaru every morning, I really can't help but want to tear them off…so, that's why, when I saw the slashed news and papers…I—I mistakenly thought that I did that…"

Aoi's delicate body looked frailer than before, and her face got paler. Her large eyes were seething with agony.

"I THOUGHT THAT IT WOULD BE GREAT IF ALL MY MEMORIES OF HIKARU WOULD VANISH!"

The moment she cried out—Koremitsu felt he had heard the sound of Hikaru's heart breaking.

Hikaru, who was the prosecutor of sorts before now, stood there like a convict being judged for heavy crimes.

He did not argue as he closed his lips, and his sad eyes showed helplessness—

Aoi then lowered her head and ran away.

"Wait!"

Koremitsu followed after her.

"Don't follow me! Hikaru's feelings—affections— for me are like the stars in the sky falling down on the ground; they don't exist!"

Aoi exclaimed as she ran.

These words carved Koremitsu's heart.

Why must she keep saying such things?

Hikaru was certainly right beside Aoi.

He still remained on this world to fulfill the promise he made with her.

And she actually said something like it'll be great if he disappeared—that she can't help but wreck it. Why must she let out such a heartbroken voice, such a painful expression, why—

His chest felt tight, and he had difficulty breathing as his body ached.

Hikaru said that you're his hope! Even so—

"Please! Wait! Aoi Saotome! Listen to me!"

Aoi ran from the courtyard to the corridor, and Koremitsu tried his best to catch up. He felt Hikaru's presence behind him, his pain , and continued chasing after her.

There's not enough time.

Aoi's birthday was on Sunday - two days from now. If Koremitsu could not open her heart before than, he would not be able to pass on the remaining 6 birthday presents, and he would not be able to pass on Hikaru's feelings to Aoi!

Even though this was already Hikaru's last chance!

Hikaru could not celebrate Aoi's birthday with her already!

"Stop right there! Aoi Saotome! I have something I want to give you!"

Aoi dashed up the stairs.

The light of noon shot through the windows on the stairs.

"Hey! Aoi Saotome! Saotome! Aoi! –Miss Aoi!"

Miss Aoi.

The moment he called out to her, she stopped in her tracks.

However, she did not look back and she knelt down weakly.

She was everything but alright.

Koremitsu sprinted to her.

Hikaru too.

"Miss Aoi! Miss Aoi!"

Aoi was still groggy as she closed her eyes, worn from it all, breathing with pain. Even when Koremitsu was carrying her, she showed no reaction. Koremitsu was shocked to realize how light Aoi was.

"Hikaru, where's the infirmary?"

"First floor!"

"Lead the way."

He carried Aoi as he ran to the infirmary.

On the way back, Koremitsu went by Honoka and Hiina, who caught up.

"Wait! What's going on!? What happened to Her Highness Aoi!?"

"Wow, a Princess Carry! Can I have a photo!?"

"Idiot! I'll kill you if you dare to take one!"

He yelled these words as he ran off.

Koremitsu let Aoi lie on the infirmary bed, and finally heaved a sigh of relief.

His hair and clothes were drenched in sweat to a point where he could squeeze it out.

"Overexertion, lack of sleep, and malnutrition."

The infirmary teacher frowned.

Koremitsu learned that Aoi felt uncomfortable during a lesson a few days ago, and came over to the infirmary to rest.

"At that time, I emphasized to her that she had to have the minimum amount of sleep and nutrition. Looks like she's still thinking about Hikaru, really, who can blame her…?"

The teacher said with distress. Hikaru lowered his eyelashes, seemingly accepting this lecture.

Once lunch break ended, Koremitsu was advised by the teacher to return to the classroom, and he insisted.

"I want to stay with her!"

His attitude was unexpectedly adamant, and he hammered himself down to the bed.

"Teacher, please let Akagi stay here."

The teacher finally relented, whether it was because of Honoka's request, or that the teacher was terrified of Koremitsu's intensity.

"Thanks, Shikibu."

"No need to thank me. Her Highness Aoi…it'll be great if she can get well."

She whispered, and left the infirmary.

Koremitsu looked down upon Aoi, lying on the bad.

Lack of sleep? Overexertion? Malnutrition? What in the world?

"This person…she's always trying to act tough, but always so reckless."

She continued to insist on going to school, and continued to stay inside the arts room to paint after school—she looked like she was living the same life she had when Hikaru was still alive, but in fact, that was not the case.

She agonized all this time.

Aoi had been trying to force herself to act tough - maybe because she did not want others to notice this pain within her.

A tear slid from the corner of Aoi's closed eyelid.

Hikaru knelt down beside the bed, his eyes filled with regret as he looked at Aoi's sleeping face.

"…Miss Aoi, definitely realized that the one who cut the news and the papers was from the arts club…she felt that she herself had a motive for doing this, which is why she continued to blame herself…this is the kind of girl she is."

—No! he didn't do it…! It's not him. It's not him!

Aoi looked like she was almost in tears as she repeated these words in the corridor.

At that moment, Aoi was certainly defending Koremitsu.

Even though this was out of her own guilt.

—I…always thought of tearing down those colored papers so that I won't have to remember them…

Those words were Aoi's true thoughts too.

—when I saw the slashed news and papers…I—I mistakenly thought that I did that…

I THOUGHT THAT IT WOULD BE GREAT IF ALL MY MEMORIES OF HIKARU WOULD VANISH!

Aoi was trembling back then.

She never had any feelings for Hikaru in the first place.

Koremitsu thought of Aoi's state of mind when she said this, and Hikaru's feelings when he heard this, and felt hot inside.

"…Miss Aoi had always been like this. Whenever she's extremely sad, whenever she felt like crying, she would force herself to say 'there's nothing wrong', puff her face to look away…"

Hikaru said with melancholy.

She looked angry on the surface because her inner heart was saddened.

She saw herself as being unloved by Hikaru, causing her to be saddened and cry out in gloom.

Koremitsu recalled how, in his youth, he drew many crosses on the writing paper when his mother left him.

Aoi was just like him.

Like Koremitsu, she would protect her inner heart by denying everything.

Aoi in the photo album would glance at Hikaru when she was slightly away from Hikaru.

But when both of them were together, she would look away.

Hikaru knew more than anyone how clumsy Aoi was, the pain she had. Thus, when Aoi vented out her feelings, Hikaru's heart felt like it was butchered through.

He lowered his eyes as he looked down at Aoi sadly.

He wanted to use his fingers to wipe the tears off Aoi's crying face, but his fingers passed through.

Hikaru's face was full of anguish.

Koremitsu observed this, and his heart felt like it was torn asunder.

He really wanted to tell Aoi that Hikaru was standing here.

He wanted to tell her that Hikaru was worried about her.

But no matter how many times Hikaru tried to touch Aoi, he failed, and he could only retract his hand in a forlorn manner.

He bit his lips, showed a depressed look as he looked at Aoi longingly, smiled, ostensibly trying to endure the pain—and said gently,

"Koremitsu…there's a vending machine in front of the infirmary. Can you get a can of milk shake so that Miss Aoi can drink it when she wakes up?"

"Oh, okay."

The bell indicating the end of the 5th period rang.

Koremitsu stood up from the pipe chair and silently walked out of the infirmary.

His heart was still aching because of the smile he saw on Hikaru 's face.

He hesitated for a moment, dropped a coin into the vending machine, and turned to Hikaru anxiously.

"Well…I shouldn't be asking this in this situation."

He tried to remain calm as he pressed on the button indicating the 'milkshake' choice, but his throat was trembling as his fingers were dripping with seat.

"Are…you really…killed by someone?"

GATAN. The sound of the milkshake can dropping rang.

Hikaru gave an abnormally calm expression as he looked back at Koremitsu silently.

"That's because the News Club girl said so."

"…"

"I can ignore it if it's made up."

"I'm not too sure."

He spoke with an adult-like tone.

"I'm a harem prince who goes around hooking up girls…so I guess there should be a lot of girls who wanted to kill me."

He avoided this topic in such a vague manner.

Why did he want to avoid this topic?

Koremitsu thought about it, and he felt a chill up his back.

What exactly was the 'rumor' Hiina Oumi heard about?

Hikaru went silent.

Just when he felt something icy stuck in his throat.

"Akagi."

Asai Saiga was standing there with an admonishing expression.

"I heard that Aoi fainted."

"She's resting on the bed now."

He answered as he took out the milkshake can.

The can was still scalding, and his fingers were hot.

"Milkshake…?"

Asai suddenly frowned.

"It's for Aoi to drink when she wakes up."

Once he said that, Asai's expression became sharper.

"…Did you hear it from Hikaru? That Aoi likes milkshake more than coffee."

"Yeah."

Koremitsu was about to return back to the infirmary, only to be stopped by Asai's stern tone,

"Akagi, please return to the classroom. I'll take care of Aoi."

"I still have some things I want to say to her."

"Your presence would only cause Aoi's body condition to worsen. Speaking of which, did Aoi not faint because of you?"

Hikaru's expression froze.

Koremitsu too stopped in his tracks.

It was true that Koremitsu was the one who kept chasing after Aoi, causing her to end up in the infirmary.

Also, the reason why the girl from the arts club blamed the paper slashing onto Aoi was because Koremitsu went over to the arts room every day, and Aoi kept badmouthing Hikaru.

Koremitsu kept running forward to express Hikaru's feelings, but never considered the consequences, and did not notice that Aoi did not have her proper meals, did not sleep well, and was in agony the entire time.

He was enraged by Aoi's words, and lashed out such overboard comments to her.

She must have been terrified to see a savage-looking wild dog hounding her, barking at her. What Koremitsu did may have opened the scars within Aoi all the more.

Right beside Koremitsu was Hikaru, who lowered his head sadly.

Koremitsu grabbed onto the milkshake can, his skin almost scalded as he was unable to argue back.

Did I force Aoi into despair?

Asai showed displeasure on her face.

"It's my fault for not taking care of Aoi and leaving her alone today. I do have to reflect on this. From this moment, I won't allow any of Hikaru's fans to hurt Aoi."

"Those girls have their troubles too. Don't punish them for it. if Aoi knows about it, she'll definitely blame herself."

Koremitsu stared back at Asai.

"I don't want to be advised by you regarding Aoi."

Asai retorted with a berating tone.

She then looked at Koremitsu with an icy stare.

"If, even if, you're Hikaru's friend, you can't use this as an excuse to hurt Aoi verbally. I definitely won't recognize someone like you as a representative for Hikaru."

All her words were piercing through Koremitsu's chest.

His hand that was holding the milkshake got number and number.

"One more thing, Koremitsu Akagi, it's impossible for you to express Hikaru's feeling. Nobody can."

He had to say something.

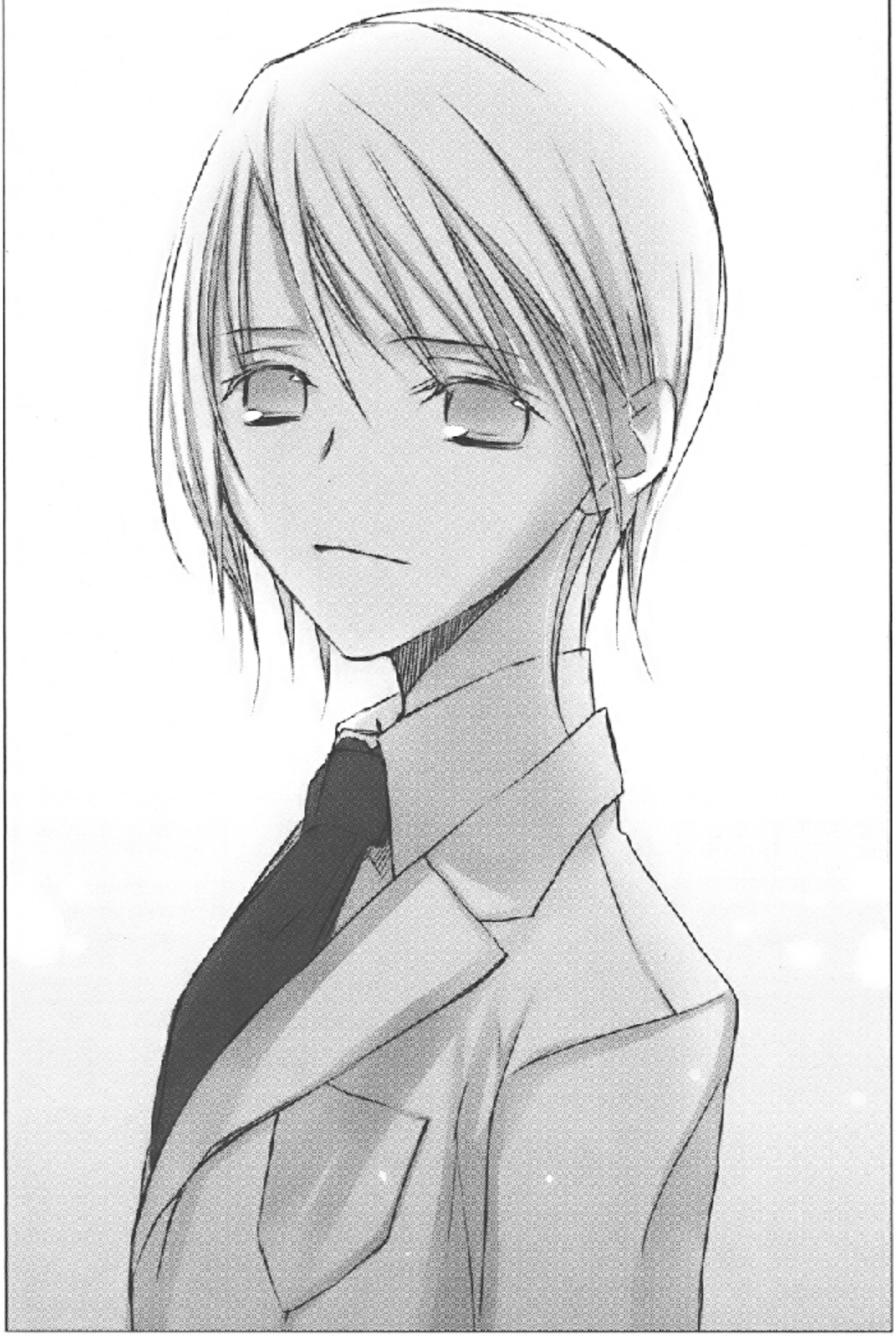
He was Hikaru's real representative, and he had to fight back.

Right, I have to say something s-

He sank into deep thought while enduring the pain of his gut being ripped apart, looking for words he should say.

At this moment, a quiet voice rang,

"Koremitsu…that's enough."



He could not believe that these words came from Hikaru directly.

Hikaru stood between Koremitsu and Asai, showed a light smile on his face tersely, and shook his head,

"*Forget about it.*"

Forget about it?

What are you saying, Hikaru?

As Koremitsu was about to collapse on his knees, Asai said,

"I'll celebrate Aoi's birthday with her to make her forget all about Hikaru. Speaking of which, the burden of being Hikaru's fiancée was already too much for her."

As Hikaru listened to these words, his face was contorted with bitterness.

—I THOUGHT THAT IT WOULD BE GREAT IF ALL MY MEMORIES OF HIKARU WOULD VANISH!

Koremitsu saw Hikaru's suffering expression as the latter was trying to get him to agree, and he could not counter Asai's argument.

Damn it!

He handed the warm milkshake can to Asai.

"Give this to Aoi."

He grumbled as he left the infirmary.

His body felt torn apart as he thought about how he did not finish the errand.

Hikaru remained silent as he followed Koremitsu sidelong. It was a weak existence, one almost devoid of existence.

They were about to reach the classroom.

Koremitsu whispered to Hikaru as he walked on,

"Do you really think this is for the best?"

Hikaru went silent for a moment, and then spoke,

"Asa might be right…"

His hollow expression was full of despair, and he let out words of regret.

"I kept hurting Miss Aoi up till now. It's too late to try and salvage anything here. Maybe I'm just trying to satisfy myself by fulfilling this promise…and I made my beloved Miss Aoi—cry again."

His lowered eyelashes trembled, and his voice was filled with unrestrained pain.

He lifted his head and smiled with an anguished expression.

"And Koremitsu, I can't give Miss Aoi happiness as a ghost now. Maybe it's time to give her a new start."

"…"

"In the arts room, when I told Miss Aoi to move her lips if she could hear my voice…I still had that little hope even though I know it's impossible…even though Miss Aoi was angry, even if she would look away angrily…but she never noticed me in the slightest."

At that time, Hikaru and Aoi were almost sticking together.

Hikaru's weak eyes were ostensibly pleading for Aoi to look at him.

But Aoi never looked back as she continued to draw the large cross on the canvas.

She said that Hikaru was the worst liar.

Koremitsu's hand that was holding onto the milkshake can still felt hot.

He was unsatisfied, full of angst, and he had difficulty breathing.

He could not endure the sight of Hikaru's smile again as he lowered his head.

What Asai said was true.

It was too much for the serious-natured Aoi to bear the burden of Hikaru's fiancée. She must have been hurt, seeing Hikaru flirt around with so many girls to the point where he became infamous as a playboy.

But it was too snobbish of Hikaru to say that he wanted to express his love only at the point of his death.

Koremitsu too bore the crime as the representative, defending Hikaru even though he knew about this.

He kept repeated his one-sided approach, caused the incident, and forced Aoi into despair.

He really wanted to fall on his knees in regret.

But even so, is it really alright to give up like this?

Is it good to let Aoi's birthday pass by without doing anything?

And am I—going to watch Hikaru give up like this without saying anything?

He arrived in front of the classroom.

Honoka was certainly worried over Koremitsu as she waited inside the classroom.

She left her seat, poked her head out from the rear door, looked around the corridor, and asked, "How's Her Highness, Akagi?"

"She's fine."

Honoka heaved a sigh of relief, and at the next moment, she opened her eyes frantically,

"Wait—where're you going?"

"Walk around."

Koremitsu growled gruffly and passed by the classroom door.

The class bell rang from above.

"WAIT! AKAGI! COME BACK FOR CLASS! THE SIXTH PERIOD ISN'T OVER YET! AKAGI! AKAGI~!"

Honoka hollered out from behind.

But Koremitsu did not care as he ran forward in large steps.

"Koremitsu? What's wrong? You just passed by the classroom, you know?"

Hikaru said with bewilderment.

Koremitsu wordlessly ascended the stairs.

He gritted his teeth and took one heavy step after another as he climbed.

"Koremitsu, hello, Koremitsu? Do you hear me?"

He climbed up onto the top level, and opened the door leading to the roof.

The wind blew towards Koremitsu from the front, and his crimson hair fluttered.

He stepped onto the roof, closed the door, and roared,

"I'M LISTENING!"

Hikaru's eyes widened.

Koremitsu looked up, and vented out all the emotions he held within like a torrent.

"I CAME HERE BECAUSE I WANT TO TALK WITH YOU! DON'T YOU GIVE ME THAT WORTHLESS EXPRESSION! DIDN'T YOU HAUNT ME BECAUSE YOU WANT TO PASS ALONG YOUR FEELINGS TO AOI!? YOU'RE DEAD, BUT I CAN HEAR YOUR VOICE CLEARLY! I CAN DEFINITELY HEAR YOUR WORDS!"

He thumped his chest violently.

Hikaru was in awe at the declaration.

Koremitsu's unwavering spirit could be realized from his expression.

It was an expression that said, *Are you really going to give up here ?*

Were those feelings you showed when you looked at the album truly this downtrodden?

You looked at Aoi with such passion in the arts room - can you treat the feelings you showed back then as nothing?

"ISN'T AOI YOUR BELOVED!? DIDN'T YOU SAY THIS TO ME!? DON'T TELL ME THAT'S A LIE!? DIDN'T YOU SWEAR NOT TO CHEAT AROUND AND BE WITH HER FOREVER!? WERE THOSE ALL LIES!?"

Hikaru's face turned pale, the ends of his lips curled up.

He smiled. It was no longer a warm smile, but a tense one that hinted at a searing pain inside.

"I'm not lying. I've always loved Miss Aoi."

"Then…we have to tell Aoi this no matter what. Aoi has always thought that you never loved her."

-For me, genuine affection is like stars in the sky falling down to the ground - it doesn't happen!

Aoi's voice echoed in his mind.

What were the chances of a meteor dropping? Why did she have such belief?

"DIDN'T YOU SAY THAT YOU WON'T LEAVE A CRYING GIRL ALONE? WON'T YOU WATER A FLOWER THAT'S WILTING? THEN TELL HER, TELL AOI HOW MUCH YOU VALUE THIS PROMISE WITH HER! I'LL PASS HER YOUR WORDS, YOUR FEELINGS! JUST SAY 'PLEASE', BECAUSE WE'RE FRIENDS—I'LL DEFINITELY PASS ON THE FEELINGS TO YOU! IF AOI'S TEARS CAN'T BE WIPED AWAY, I'LL USE A HANDKERCHIEF TO WIPE THEM OFF ON YOUR BEHALF! ARE YOU STILL GOING TO SAY 'FORGET ABOUT IT' HERE!?"

He roared aloud, his throat feeling like it was about to explode, continuing in his mind.

Say it out.

Just say the word 'please'.

If you give up like this, Aoi won't know your feelings for her forever.

She'll just think that she's not loved because she doesn't know how you feel, and will think that she's just designated as a fiancée.

Koremitsu's mother left her family without leaving a single word to her son.

Koremitsu could not give his mother a present.

But Hikaru should have something he wanted to give to Aoi.

Aoi should have the privilege to accept Hikaru's present.

That's why, say it to me—

Hikaru closed his lips slightly and frowned as he looked back at Koremitsu.

His clear eyes were filled with bitterness and anguish.

Those lips trembling lips of his uttered words.

"Please…Koremitsu."

This line was enough for him.

That night, after Koremitsu left the apartment, Hikaru shouted to the inked night sky that they were friends, and Koremitsu felt a rising sense of delight and embarrassment.

Those words alone allow me to overcome all difficulty to see all his wishes through.

Please.

I can agree to those words without asking for anything in return.

For a sake of a 'friend', I can do this confidently.

"Alright, leave it to me!"

His chest was filled with delight.

The delight rose from the bottom of his belly, and he exclaimed as he ran out.

Honoka was leaning at the side of the roof leading to the roof, feeling extremely nervous.

She skipped class and followed Koremitsu up to the roof because she was worried about him.

She heard a growl from the other side of the door.

Was he arguing? With who?

The moment she put her hand on the door handle, a hearty voice rang in her ears.

"Alright, leave it to me!"

The footsteps approached, and she hid behind the door. The door then opened, and a cheerful Koremitsu sprinted out with his red hair flowing.

Eh? Wait, what's going on?

His stiff face looked extremely painful when he came back from the infirmary, but now, he looked radiant and dazzling, as if a light shone upon him as he shot out like a bullet.

The unforgettable bright red hair, that reliable yet reckless attitude of a bratty king, and the expression of invincibility of caused her heart to throb.

It felt like the moment she fell in love with a novel on first sight last night—

Koremitsu raced down the stairs like a wild dog that had been newly freed.

And he dashed through the corridor without hesitation.

Wings were ostensibly attached to his feet as he did not feel tired at all.

He reached his hand into his pocket.

It had the 2nd present he bought from the ticket shop two days prior.

It may be the first time he bought such a thing, and the attendant was startled when he endured his shame to ask gruffly, “Please give me two.”

What he touched let out a rippling sound from within his pocket.

Aoi walked out of the infirmary with Asai supporting her.

Her petite face was still pale.

She wanted to endure her tears as she bit her lips and lowered her head.

Koremitsu called to her.

“Aoi!”

Asai immediately raised her head, shocked.

She moved in front of Aoi, ostensibly trying to hide her, but Koremitsu did not mind as he dug out the item from his pocket and handed it to Aoi.

“This is the second present!”

Aoi looked even more startled.

The folded envelope was crumpled as it had been in his pocket all this while. He placed it in Aoi’s hands.

“It’s a ticket to the theme park! Let’s go there on Sunday!”

He looked at the rooted Aoi and quickly spoke with force to emphasize.

“We’ll meet at 1pm at the station near the school! It’s a promise ”

“I’ll celebrate Aoi’s birthday.”

Asai spoke coldly and tried to snatch the ticket from Aoi's hand.

But Aoi grabbed onto the envelope with the ticket firmly.

This caused Asai's expression to freeze.

Aoi bit her lips painfully, not indicating whether she would go or not.

As he looked at Aoi's eyes, Koremitsu gave her a confident nod.

"I'll be waiting! Definitely! You definitely must come along! I'll hand over the remaining 5 presents!"

Holding onto the ticket, he fingertips shuddered slightly with a twitch.

"You don't have to listen to him, Aoi."

Asai held Aoi's hand and walked beside Koremitsu.

But Aoi eyed Koremitsu rigidly.

"You must come if you want to know Hikaru's feelings! Aoi!"

Shocked, Aoi jerked as she turned around and looked forward.

Koremitsu watched Aoi move forward with her head down, and cried out to her in his heart.

You definitely must come, Aoi. You have the privilege to accept what Hikaru wants to give you.

At the same time, Hikaru—

Stood beside Koremitsu, rapt with the intensity of the moment, speaking to himself.

“I’ll be waiting, Miss Aoi.”

</noinclude>

Chapter 6 - If That Star Smiled at Me

“Happy birthday, Aoi.”

Asai, dressed in simple silk pajamas, pushed aside the French floral curtain as she turned her head back and spoke to Aoi.

Aoi sat on the bed as she rubbed her eyes.

It was Sunday morning.

The bright morning sun shone in from the outside, and the weather seemed fine.

Asai stayed overnight at Aoi’s house since Saturday night.

She came to make cake and food for Aoi today, hence her need to visit and prepare on Saturday.

Asai was a reliable childhood friend, and though she was actually a few months younger than Aoi, she was taller than Aoi for as long as she could remember, smarter than Aoi, more determined, and she cared for Aoi like a true older sister.

Aoi’s father also had a lot of trust in Asai.

Whenever Asai came to visit Aoi, Aoi’s father would commend and thank her.

“Aoi has always been in your care.”

“Please continue to take care of our Aoi.”

"Just eat a little for breakfast. I'll make some sugarless pancakes to go along with fruit yogurt, how about it? You should be able to finish it all. I'll make some vegetable soup too so that your body won't go cold."

Asai had decided all this with precision.

And Aoi merely needed to abide.

Aoi took off her nightgown with laces lined on the hem, and changed into a cotton one-piece dress comfortable for her skin.

This clothing, too, was bought when she went shopping with Asai.

"That attire's good. It suits you, Aoi."

Even in the early days of their friendship, she only needed to listen to Asai to avoid problems.

Right, even if it was related to Hikaru—

—Hikaru's playboy tendencies will never be cured. He's the kind that won't live on if he doesn't get a new love partner.

Asai spoke of Hikaru with such a critical expression.

Though the trio often played together when they were young, Asai showed no mercy to Hikaru. She really pampered Aoi, but would deal with Hikaru in an icy cold tone and attitude.

—Hikaru's not a match for you, Aoi.

Asai had remarked in the past.

—Hikaru is definitely not an honest man who'll simply protect you only, Aoi. He'll continue with all sorts of shallow love relationships with many women, and will continue to hurt you.

Aoi also thought that she was right -

that Asa's words were always correct.

—You should tell your grandfather to cancel your marriage with Hikaru. Do you want me to help you say it?

But she could not agree to this particular line from Asai alone.

We're merely engaged in name, and even if I don't try to cancel it, Hikaru won't marry me sincerely.

Of course, I won't become Hikaru's wife.

That was what she said, but Aoi never formally cancelled the engagement.

This was despite Asai telling her to do so many times.

She kept saying that Aoi would not have any unhappiness, any painful memories.

If she had listened to Asai's words back then, perhaps Hikaru's death would not be so painful to her.

Perhaps she would not feel the anguish that lacerated her heart, and she would not feel suffocated in the middle of the night.

She received the lilacs stalks two days before Hikaru's death, and once she learned of his death, she snapped the stalks and threw them away.

This is the first present. I prepared another 6 gifts for your birthday. Please look forward to it.

Aoi was pained to realize that this promise caused her heart to race—and her body felt like it was breaking apart—

She could not forgive Hikaru for breaking the promise in the worst way possible.

—Liar!

She tore the letter, snapped the stalks, and said several times with a hoarse voice,

—Liar! Liar!

Thus, when the person proclaiming himself as Hikaru's good friend, Koremitsu, appeared in front of her, claiming he would celebrate Aoi's birthday in place of Hikaru, Aoi was immensely furious.

And also, Koremitsu had an outstanding red hair, a savage dog-like sharp stare, and was very crude in his words—it was impossible to imagine that a primitive person like him would be Hikaru's friend.

He definitely was trying to lie to her, just as Asai said.

She must not believe that he was trying to convey Hikaru's thoughts.

That was what she thought before now.

—This is the second present!

The passionate stare was looking right through Aoi,

He reached his hand out to her.

—It's a ticket to the theme park! Let's go there on Sunday!

He forcefully handed the envelope with the ticket over to Aoi, and exclaimed with a serious voice.

—I'll be waiting! Definitely! You definitely must come along! I'll hand over the remaining 5 presents!

She sat up on the bed lightly, pulled out the antique drawer with the floral carvings on it, and stared at it uneasily.

The thing placed inside the drawer was the theme park ticket Koremitsu forcefully handed to her on Friday.

She told Asai that she had already thrown it away, but in fact, she kept it with her.

Just like how she did not break up the engagement.

—You must come if you want to know Hikaru's feelings! Aoi!

Hikaru's feelings.

Did they really exist?

They were only engaged in name, so what kind of feelings did Hikaru have for her exactly?

When he was still alive, he would say 'Miss Aoi's really cute, I really love you' as easily as if he was breathing, to a point where it was practically his greeting. Once she learnt that he would say such things to other girls too, she felt extremely angry for being fooled.

—I can't believe your 'love', Hikaru.

Aoi puffed her cheeks and glared at him, Hikaru however gave an angelic smile as he stared back at her eyes, saying,

—What must I do to make you believe that I really love you, Miss Aoi?

—Then, try making the stars fall down from the sky. If you can't do that, I won't believe whatever you say. You're to blame for always saying such empty words to make fun of me.

Aoi turned her back towards Hikaru, and heard his laughter from behind.

—Then, I have to think about a way to make the stars fall when I want to confess to you that 'I love you most'.

He said that teasingly.

Even though it was impossible to make the stars fall.

…That's why, Hikaru's feelings—for me are like the stars in the sky falling down. They don't exist.

She muttered hoarsely, and her chest was ostensibly ripped apart.

The cat she reared in her house, Shell Blue, meowed as it leapt onto Aoi's knees.

It was plump, its black and white fur looked like a cow, and its face was flat. It was definitely not a pretty cat.

But she fell in love with it on first sight when she saw how it was drenched in the rain as it was placed in the cardboard box.

Aoi cuddled that heavy body tightly.

I don't want to know about any…of Hikaru's feelings or anything.

"Argh~~~~~, why's she not here yet!?"

It was 1.15pm.

Koremitsu suddenly grumbled as he stood at the gantry gates of the station.

The passers-by passing through the gates were shocked, and hurriedly walked away, ostensibly avoiding him.

"Damn, it's been over 15 minutes already. Is that Aoi planning to make me wait here."

"They're girls, so maybe they're late because they spent the time dolling themselves up. The longest time I spent waiting for a girl was 6 hours."

"Tch, you really have the patience to wait, huh? Speaking of which, it's amazing that she would appear even other you waited for her for 6 hours."

Koremitsu was thoroughly speechless.

However, to him, who had never invited anyone out, and did not have much patience, a 15 minute wait was too long for him.

"Let me ask just to be clear. Is Aoi the type to be late because she's dressing up?"

"Nope, she's the type who'll arrive 30 minutes earlier, walk around the area, return back to the appointed area 10 minutes before the time, and pout when her date appears, saying that she just came by early out of coincidence."

"That means she's not coming!"

Koremitsu got through the gantry and rode on the subway train that just arrived.

He could not wait for her any longer.

"If she's not coming, I'll go fetch her myself!"

The passengers in the train immediately looked over at Koremitsu in unison.

"The cake should be almost done."

Asai indulged herself in the tasting of the sandwich and the red tea across the white table as she looked at the clock.

It was 1.45pm.

Aoi's heart was hurting with every beat.

The appointed time Koremitsu promised her was 1pm.

He must have returned back angrily.

She did not have the appetite to consume the sandwich and the red tea, and merely cuddled Shell Blue as she lowered her head.

Is this really alright?

Asai said before that there was no need to listen to that man's words.

However...

On Friday, when she woke up in the infirmary, Asai brought in a can of milkshake and handed it unwillingly to Aoi, saying,

"It's lukewarm. It may not be that nice to drink."

Asai did not like the milkshake the school vending machines sold, and said that it was a drink that had preservatives and sugar mixed into the milk, that it was not good for the body, and she did not recommend Aoi to drink it.

It was true that it was not a refined taste, but Aoi loved that sweetness she could not taste at home, and bought it to drink from time to time while secretly hiding it from Asai.

"It's okay. I'll keep it then. Thank you, Asa."

The milkshake had already cooled down, but she could feel the liquid gently soothing her body.

As Aoi drank the milkshake, Asai inadvertently looked over with a stern expression.

Did Koremitsu leave this can of milkshake behind?

Hikaru would gently and her a can of milkshake from time to time,

"Keep it a secret from Asa."

"Don't treat me as a kid. I've stopped liking milkshakes since the first years of elementary school already."

She would blush as she argues back. However, Hikaru would keep giving Aoi milkshakes, and not coffee or Oolong tea.

That was because he knew that Aoi still liked milkshake.

Thus, the one who left the milkshake in the infirmary was not Asa, but Koremitsu—

No, I shouldn't be thinking about this any longer.

The appointed time had long passed, and it would be meaningless for her to think any longer.

She would merely be adding on to her bitterness.

Right, she would simply not think about anything related to Hikaru—and forget everything about him, just like the time after his death.

"I'll go check on the cake."

Asa walked out of the room.

She caressed her face on Shell Blue, which looked worried too as it let out a meow.

Suddenly, Aoi's phone on the dressing table rang.

She picked it up, and found an unknown number calling it.

Normally, she would ignore this call.

But, maybe—this premonition rose in her heart, and she pressed the call button.

"Oi, Aoi!"

A gruff voice immediately entered her ears.

"It's already past the appointed time!"

Why did Koremitsu know Aoi's number?

This suspicion was unnecessary for her though, as her heart trembled the moment she heard his voice—it was not a feeling of fear of puzzlement, but something else—

"I'm now calling you in front of your house! Hurry up, get the ticket, and get out here!"

Koremitsu's tone was very gawkish, but he was still trying to express himself.

It was the same voice he used when Aoi was surrounded by Hikaru's fan, the same desperate pleading voice.

—HOLD IT RIGHT THERE—!

He yelled as he got in front of Aoi.

Even as Aoi was showing off the inner ugliness within her, he caught up to her no matter what.

“Meow—”

Shell Blue on the bed let out an unhappy cry.

She opened the drawer, pinched the envelope with the ticket inside, and ran out of the room without taking her bag, cellphone, purse, monthly pass, as she dashed right down to the entrance.

The sweet smell of butter and sugar whiffed in from the kitchen.

Asai was definitely taking the cake out from the oven.

I’m sorry, Asa.

She arrived at the entrance, hurriedly latched her sandal belts, and opened the door.

She ran to the entrance while seemingly lost in herself, and when she finally arrived at the door, she found Koremitsu there, waiting with the phone held beside his ear.

“You’re late.”

The wild dog-like eyes glared at Aoi as his frowned and grumbled this line with his coarse voice.

Aoi felt an incomplete feeling in her chest.

All sorts of feelings rose up Aoi's throat, and she looked up at Koremitsu, shuddering slightly.

"Okay, you got the ticket, right? Let's go."

Aoi did not move however.

Koremitsu frowned.

"Tch, are you still hesitating?"

"…I"

"Huh?"

"I was so shocked that my legs couldn't move…it's all your fault."

Her throat and eyes were heating up, and she could not process the messy thoughts within her. She begrudged Koremitsu as she looked like she was going to cry.

"Really, you really cause me quite a bit of trouble here, Princess."

"I don't remember asking for your care—kya!"

Aoi's mouth let out a soft squeal.

Koremitsu carried Aoi up.

And her legs were flailing in the air.

"W-wh-wha-wha-what, what is this!?"

Koremitsu carried Aoi up in a Princess Carry.

"What are you doing? Please put me down!"

"Didn't you say your feet can't move? I'm moving you now! Your birthday will pass by if you dily-daly like this!"

"But you're being too reckless here even if that's the case! Put me down!"

"I carried you once before, so just shut up. Besides, it's not tough for me since you're so light."

He actually said that he carried me before—

Koremitsu's words caused Aoi to blush.

Speaking of which, she found herself lying on the infirmary bed when she woke up after she fainted on the stairs—Asai also said that she was not certain about Aoi's situation before she was moved to the infirmary, so maybe, at that moment—!

Her face, ears, neck and head were burning hot, like they were on fire.

Her body shook about as Koremitsu carried her, and nearly dropped a few times; she subconsciously wrapped her arms

around Koremitsu's neck. When Aoi got her foot injured at the tennis court at Asai's house last year, Hikaru gently carried her in her tennis outfit back to the pain.

This pain is nothing. I can walk on my own! Don't carry me like a kid!

As Aoi blushed and protested angrily, Hikaru gave her a gentle smile.

—But that's because you're a very important girl to me, Miss Aoi.

She felt embarrassed, delighted and yet furious at herself, and sealed her lips as she lowered her head, showing an unhappy look.

—She's a very important person!

Koremitsu said the same thing as Hikaru, and Aoi felt her chest being pierced through as her inner heart was confused, not knowing what to do.

She did not want to recall.

Hikaru's gentle smile, intoxicating voice, tender hands, flamboyant expression, his familiar movements, every word he said to her, the pain—she wanted to forget them all.

But her body was shaking in Koremitsu's hands, her heart was wavering, and the scenery was changing. The wind caressed her face, and she kept recalling the past from deep within her memories.

When she met Hikaru for the first time, she found him to be as cute as an angel. When he told her 'let's play together', Aoi was so speechless that she was unable to express her words clearly.

She would tag along with Asai whenever she visited Hikaru's house, and observed that Hikaru seemed to be more delighted when chatting with Asai.

Asa's wiser than me, more mature than me, and should be a better match for Hikaru than me.

This thought never disappeared within her.

Asai often said vicious things to Hikaru, but even so, it felt like the two had a consonance in their hearts, to a point where Aoi kept wondering if there was some kind of a unique bond between them.

For example, whenever she spotted Hikaru fooling around with other girls, she would give a chastising look without any signs of faltering, and would say coolly,

"I see your bad habit's at work again. How long do you intend to keep this love line going?"

In response, Hikaru gave a warm smile and said,

"All flowers, all romances will continue to bloom within my heart."

The moment he answered this,

Aoi felt that there was an understanding between them, to a point where there was no need for jealousy and excuses, and her heart started to ache.

Whether she met Hikaru, Aoi would keep lambasting him.

That was because he was always with another girl.

She could not remain as calm as Asai.

To Hikaru, Asai was most certainly different from the other girls—a special existence.

But Aoi kept thinking of herself as a fiancée in name because her parents engaged her in this marriage; she thought that she was not cute, and did not have any attractive charms at all.

Even so, Hikaru kept showering her with a dazzling smile.

He would talk to her with a voice full of love.

He would give her a prankster's expression and hand over a can of milkshake.

He would often say words Aoi did not expect in a gentle tone, causing her to be confused.

Hikaru's too much.

Hikaru's very sly.

He's always fooling me because I haven't gotten used to interacting with the opposite gender.

The moment she thought this, Aoi's chest would falter, and her face would heat up. Whenever Hikaru treated her gently, she would answer back with a cold attitude.

Aoi could not help but hate herself for drinking coffee, which she hated most, in front of Hikaru, and landed herself in such a pitiful state.

—Liar!

She swore to forget everything about Hikaru when she faced his smiling obituary photo, surrounded by white flowers.

If she did not do so, she would not be able to protect her inner heart.

She could not endure the despair brought about by Hikaru's absence.

She would not celebrate whatever birthday or anything.

She would never believe that guy again.

That was what she decided.

Hikaru's friend carried her to the station.

There were more passers-by moving through, and they were glancing over secretly. What is this? Are they filming a drama? Voices could be heard.

"It-it's fine…I can walk on my own, so please-please put me down."

She pleaded with a teeny-weeny voice.

"Is that so?"

Koremitsu lowered his arms gently and bent his waist.

Aoi glanced to look at the side of Koremitsu's face, and found him completely drenched in sweat.

"Ah, I forgot to bring my purse out."

"Since it's your birthday, it'll be my treat."

Koremitsu said as he handed the train ticket he bought to Aoi.

—*Consider this my treat.*

She recalled the words Hikaru said when he handed her the milkshake, and her heart pounded even wilder.

"Thank you."

This person was completely different from Hikaru,

But she was too conscious of this, and was so shy that she could not lift her head. Her neck was all hot too.

When they passed through the gantry, Koremitsu held Aoi by the hand.

"I think the train is coming."

"Er-erm, the hand—"

Koremitsu too seemed to be at a loss of what to do as he saw the flustered Aoi, and tensed up,

"Well, he told me to hold hands."

He glanced diagonally upwards.

"Hikaru, that is."

—Let's hold hands, Miss Aoi.

Aoi recalled the white slender hand Hikaru reached out to her, and her heart raced.

That was when everyone went for a picnic in the hills or swimming at the beach. Whenever Hikaru invited her, she would refuse by saying there was no need.

Koremitsu's hand was sweaty and hard.

Hikaru's hand, which she held in their adolescence, should be smoother and gentler.

But even so, Aoi felt his warmth and tension from his palm and fingers, and clasped the fingers back tightly.

Koremitsu widened his eyes in surprise.

Aoi looked away shyly.

Both of them continued to hold hands on the train ride.

They passed through the entrance of the theme park, and the first attraction they went to was the jet-coaster.

"I'm a little bad at those thrilling stuff that make me scream."

"Don't worry, I never heard of any incidents like the jet-coaster rail breaking, the coaster falling off in the air or running out of the rail."

"I'm getting uneasy just by thinking about it. Please don't say such things!"

"That's why I say that it's impossible for a rail to break. It'll be a major accident if it happens."

"Ahhh, please don't say it! My mind's filled with the image of the rail breaking in two!"

Both of them were chatting away as they queued up.

Once it was time for them to get up, they latched up their safety belts,

"I shouldn't be riding on this after all."

"Oi, it's not good to give up now."

Koremitsu held onto Aoi's timid hand.

The coaster started to move.

"No~, it'll drop, it'll definitely drop down. I feel that it's going to drop down."

"Don't say such ominous things. Even I'm panicking now."

"See, I said that we're definitely going to drop~!"

"What do you mean by definitely!?"

The car let out a jerk, GATANK! After that, it started rushing down.

"KYAAA~~~!"

Aoi let out a shriek.

She held onto Koremitsu's arm as if she was clinging onto a lifeline.

And Koremitsu too screamed,

"WOOOOOAAAHHH~~~!"

The coaster dropped to the bottom, started to climb up due to inertia, and spun around in the air once. In the meantime, the duo continued to scream.

"NOOO~~~!! WE'RE FALLING~~~~!!"

"UWAAAAAAAAHHHH!!"

The coaster finally came to a stop.

Aoi was collapsed onto her seat, utterly terrified and unable to get off the coaster.

With Koremitsu's help, she finally managed to get onto the ground.

"Really, I will never…ride on that wild thing again."

While Aoi eyes' were swelling with tears,

"Weren't you being all happy yapping around kya kya like that ?"

"But I'm trembling because of fear! Didn't you make such embarrassing screams too?"

"Well, I never rode on a coaster ride ever since elementary school, and I'm a little shocked too. But a coaster ride's meant to make us scream, so shouldn't we be screaming our lungs out and make noise? It's meaningless if we're not scared of it."

Koremitsu said as he handed over a photo.

"See, don't you look like you're enjoying it on the photo?""

It was a photo of them riding on the roller coaster ride, purchased from the shop near the entrance of the ride.

Aoi was holding onto Koremitsu's arm, her mouth wide open as her eyes widened.

"Really, what's with that weird expression?"

Even her ears were all red.

"What are you saying? This expression looks much cuter than your pouting look."

Koremitsu took out a fine golden marker from his photo and wrote something on the photo. The bright and dazzling words were neat and pretty, completely different from the image Koremitsu's image would imply.

The words on it were,

"Your shocked expression is really cute. Miss Aoi at 17 years old."

Koremitsu continued to write abashedly, drew un arrow pointing at Aoi's expression on the photo, and finished it off by writing,

"Happy birthday"

He then handed it to a blushing Aoi.

"This is the 3rd birthday present."

Aoi widened her eyes as she received the photo with both hands.

—Your shocked expression is very cute too, Miss Aoi.

At the courtyard of her house, Aoi heard someone call her name,

and turned her head behind. A Holstein cattle-like fat cat with a collapsed nose was handed over to her car, scaring Aoi, and Hikaru said with a sweet expression,

—I picked up this cat from the park, but I think it like girls more than boys. Can you take care of it for me? Grandpa and the rest had agreed to it already.

Hikaru probably knew that Aoi had been feeding the cat left in the cardboard box at the park.

Please don't do any necessary things. I intend to ask father to let me raise it.

Aoi insisted.

However, Hikaru did not seem to worry too much about Aoi dampening his enthusiasm.

—Your eyes are really wide, Miss Aoi. They're really cute. If only I could have taken a photo of it.

He chuckled as he said this.

How can such an expression be cute? Please don't make fun of me! She argued back as she embraced the fat cat that became a part of her family.

She recalled that memory on the day Shell Blue joined her family as she looked at the photo of her shrieking on the roller coaster ride, and nearly broke into tears.

Does Hikaru still remember that incident?

She was different from her usual self; her eyes and mouth were wide open. She pressed this photo upon her chest.

The taste of sadness, mixed with a tint of bittersweet spread deep within her heart.

"Then, on to the next one! We still got many presents left! Let's go!"

Koremitsu grabbed Aoi's hand and pulled her to the coffee cup attraction. Aoi heaved a sigh of relief as it was not a thrilling type of attraction.

However, Koremitsu spun the steering wheel of the coffee cu too quickly, causing it to spin too quickly, and Aoi's eyes were dazed from the spinning.

Her legs were wobbly, and her head was dizzy.

She felt nauseous.

"Ack—sorry, I never played this before."

Koremitsu hurriedly apologized.

Aoi laid down on the bench beside the fence of the coffee cup attraction limply.

"I'll go wet the handkerchief."

He said as he ran off.

You don't have to keep taking care of me like this—the moment she wanted to say this, the bright red hair had already disappeared through the crowd.

For some reason, her heart was beating hard as she waited for Koremitsu.

It felt like she was waiting for Hikaru.

Even though Hikaru was no longer on this world.

And she already realized this.

But if—if Hikaru were to be celebrating Aoi's 17th birthday with her—this would certainly be the feeling.

He would also write a message on the photo and hand it to Aoi with a mischievous expression. When he sees her begrudging look, perhaps he would also say, "Eh, you're very cute, you know"—

Just thinking about this alone caused her heart to race.

Finally, Koremitsu came running back, panting as he handed over the cold handkerchief.

"Thank you very much."

Aoi, who finally calmed down, thanked as she received the handkerchief.

It was a large beige cotton handkerchief, and it felt chilly and refreshing when it touched her face.

She could not help but close her eyes.

At that moment, the fragrance of flowers came at her.

She opened her eyes, and saw Koremitsu blushing as he handed her a little bouquet of flowers.

"This is the 4th present."

He seemed to be very embarrassed as he said this stiffly—but continued to keep his eyes upon Aoi.

"Thank you very much."

The bouquet of pink Gerberas and Red Roses was surrounded by Baby's Breath grass. She took this adorable bouquet, and found a pink case right in the middle.

She put the bouquet at her knees, and opened the case.

A cute pendant appeared in front of her eyes.

She let out a long gasp.

The glamorous silver chain had a mysterious milky white moonstone placed in it.

"Hikaru chose this pendant personally and left it at the floral shop in the theme park."

"Hikaru…"

Koremitsu took the pendant from Aoi's hands, wanting to put it on her.

To Koremitsu, this was probably the first time he was doing such a thing too.

He undid the little hook as he put up a furious emotional fight that left him sweating; he brought the chain behind Aoi's neck, accidentally caught Aoi's hair in it, fumbled around with the hook, finally managed to latch it once, only for the chain to be twisted, and had to redo it. He groaned as he tried his best to latch the pendant on her.

During this time, Aoi's face was nearly buried in Koremitsu's chest a few times, and she had the urge to say that she would latch it up herself. But upon seeing Koremitsu work so hard, she found it ungrateful of her to say so. Her face was heating up, and her heart was racing. Once the pendant was finally placed upon her, both Koremitsu and Aoi heaved a sigh of relief.

"Happy birthday. The pendant really suits you."

Koremitsu said this with sweat dripping all over him.

—You're like a Princess, Miss Aoi.

When she was young, Hikaru made Aoi a crown of white clovers he got from outside.

He said it with such innocence as he put it on Aoi's head.

Aoi thought that she would not be happy when a boy cuter than her said this, and her face heated up as she said with her cheeks puffed.

—You should have a lot more Princesses other than me, Hikaru.

At that time, Hikaru looked slightly troubled as he lowered his stare.

At this point, Aoi was recollecting the past.

She recalled every single moment of how Hikaru spent the days with her, every word he said to her, every expression he made at her, every smile he made at her.

Koremitsu grabbed Aoi's hand.

"On to the next one then."

"Yes."

Whether it was the appearance or the tone, Koremitsu and Hikaru were polar opposites.

But—for some reason, she would often see the image of Hikaru appearing so often in front of her when she looked at Koremitsu. Why was it that Hikaru's gentle voice kept echoing in her ears?

Why was it that her heart was beating so wildly?

As Koremitsu held Aoi's hand, they arrived at the next destination. It was a restaurant inside the theme park.

The interior decoration had the fairy tale theme of Alice's tea party, and a waiter in black butler suit invited them in.

"You're Master Mikado who made an appointment with us, I presume? We've been waiting for you."

He led them to the table right in the middle.

They got to their seats, and the waiter immediately served a small cake with candles on it and two glasses of hot milkshakes with silver handles by the side.

The candles were in the shapes of '1' and '7' respectively, and the candle flames flickered on them.

"This is the 5th item."

Koremitsu said.

"Hikaru said that your favorite drink is a milkshake, Aoi."

His gentle expression resembled a little of Hikaru. Hikaru too had shown this expression when he once handed her the milkshake can.

"…Were you the one who handed me the milkshake can?"

She asked.

"When you were in the infirmary? Well…it was me, but well, Hikaru told me to do so."

He said disconcertedly.

So it was him after all.

Aoi's heart was filled with sweetness, just like the time when she received the milkshake can from Hikaru.

"Well, after this…"

Koremitsu suddenly stammered.

He glanced up sideways in a perturbed manner, and muttered. "Am I really going to do this?" He then lowered his head, snorted, and suddenly looked over at Aoi.

"This is the 6th present. Damn it."

Koremitsu's face was blushing as he raised his right hand up high and snapped his fingers.

And then, the Happy Birthday melody rang.

Unexpectedly, Koremitsu actually started to sing along with the rhythem.

“Haaappy—baaaaaddaaay~~~ Miss Aoi~~~~~”

This savage and primitive-looking boy seemed like a delinquent no matter what. His neck, ears and even his eyes were red as he raised his voice.

His singing was certainly not good.

It was certainly slightly off-tune too.

But he merely shrugged his shoulders, raised his eyebrows and sang wholeheartedly.

“Haaappy—baaaaaddaaay~~~ Miss Aoi~~~~~”

Koremitsu’s singing overlapped with Hikaru’s singing voice.

It was the 3rd year of her middle school.

Aoi was dejected after the singing competition held by the school ended.

She was in charge of playing the piano in the class’ choir competition, but made a mistake midway through.

She cuddled her knees as she sat in a corner of the gymnasium’s stage, and at that moment, Hikaru arrived and sat beside her.

"I'm going to sing for you now, Miss Aoi."

He said, and then started to sing with a delightful voice.

—Miss Aoi, Miss Aoi, a pure and white flower~~~~

He swapped out the 'Edelweiss' for 'Miss Aoi', and no matter how Aoi tried to stop him, "It's embarrassing. Please don't sing anymore", Hikaru continued to sing softly and gently.

—Blooming forever, in the morning wind~~~~

—Miss Aoi~ Miss Aoi~, glowing purely~ a flower that blooms on the snowland~~~

The gym's stage was dyed a madder red.

Hikaru tilted his head slightly as his clear eyes stared right at Aoi. His flowing hair was dazzling a golden color—

Unwittingly, Hikaru's face was right in front of her.

She could slightly feel the breath Hikaru let out.

His expression was filled with gentleness and passion.

She thought that they were about to kiss, and her heart was racing.

Even though it was impossible, she wondered if Hikaru's heart was racing too, and her heart beat faster.

Even though it was impossible.

Even though it was impossible for Hikaru to have feelings for her.

But,

However,

She saw Hikaru's face redden a little.

Her eyes had a wavering of timidity, and her heart was beating so wildly it was about to break apart—

She could not look straight at Hikaru until he smiled and backed off.

He's making fun of me again.

That was what she thought, but the throbbing in her heart could not cease.

Instantaneously, Hikaru...

Hikaru was really—

What, exactly, is he thinking?

Is he making fun of me? Or is he really—

At this point, the boy, who had the same color of red as the flickering flames on his messy hair, Hikaru's friend was trying his best to celebrate Aoi's birthday.

"Haaappy—baaaaaddaaay~~~ Miss Aoi~~~~~"

His rigid singing voice filled her heart, and her breath was shaken.

He was even unable to blow off the flames of the candles even after a few tries.

The customers and the employees in the shop applauded her.

Koremitsu was obviously embarrassed as he frowned.

"I'm never going to sing again. This is an exception."

He panted.

"Thank you very much. This is the best birthday day I ever heard."

Aoi tried to hide the wavering of her inner heart as she forced a delighted smile, and Koremitsu looked away, his lips relaxing a little,

"Is that so?"

But then, he continued with emphasis,

"I won't sing again."

The not-so-sweet birthday cake and the sweet milkshake brought warmth and happiness to Aoi.

However,

"Everything will end after this last one."

The moment he said that, Aoi felt a sense of loneliness splashed onto her like cold water as her heart cooled down, just like how Hikaru stood up from the gym's stage and pulled his distance from her.

The next item would be the 7th.

Once she received it, Aoi's birthday would be over.

And the promise Hikaru had with Aoi up till this point would vanish without a trace.

Koremitsu suddenly realized this, and his expression turned gloomy.

Perhaps he too felt the loneliness of this event ending, just like Aoi did.

"Yeah, there's still one more."

He seemed to be muttering to himself.

"…"

"…"

Both of them went silent. They were unwilling to look at each other in the eyes as they lowered their heads.

The white plate had the slightly melted candles of '1' and '7' on it.

"About that."

Koremitsu lifted his head.

He stared at Aoi with a blazing expression and a blushing face.

"The 7th present will take a while, so let's play to any attraction you want to ride on, find anything you want to see, and go to any place you want to go to. Let's enjoy ourselves."

Aoi too lifted her face, and smiled.

This mysterious yet warm moment will soon end.

But before that—

"Yes."

Aoi nodded without hesitation.

After that, they went to challenge a few of the thrilling attractions Aoi would normally never ride on.

"I'll never ride on this ever again! This attraction is too dangerous, spinning around, going upside-down, dropping straight down so randomly!"

Aoi insisted, but she soon pointed to another thrilling attraction and said,

"It'll be too downheartingly to complain without riding on it. Let's try that Viking ship too?"

And then, she started shrieking again with tears flowing out.

"You really don't learn from your lessons."

Koremitsu was almost at a loss of words as he glanced at her, but she argued back,

"But I like challenges!"

"Really? Let's challenge that then."

"Ehh? Isn't that completely upside down!? Uu, I-I'm challenging it!"

Koremitsu looked on at Aoi with an amused—and gentle expression, just like how Hikaru used to look at Aoi.

And then—

"It's about time."

As they were seated on the box seats of the Ferris wheel, facing each other, they looked at the sunset outside the window, and Koremitsu commented with a melancholic expression.

Aoi too was mentally prepared as she waited for the end.

My mission's about to end here.

Koremitsu thought as he looked outside the Ferris wheel window that was dyed a crimson red.

Aoi's face was dazzling as she sat at the opposite seat, seemingly intoxicated as she looked at the sunset outside the window. She was still enjoying things until the end.

I also enjoyed myself here.

He muttered to Aoi—and the handsome friend sitting beside Aoi in his heart.

Hikaru, too, showed a gentle smile.

The past few days were full of ups and downs.

The dead Hikaru suddenly appeared in front of him in the bathtub, floated above him, said that there was something he could not let go of, and requested for help.

He accepted the request reluctantly, but as Aoi was too stubborn, Koremitsu was unable to open her heart.

After numerous challenges, he got harsh words and condescending looks in return.

—That's why I say women!

He yelled out his grandfather's catchphrase several times, but was unable to change the situation.

At that time, Hikaru even tried to calm Koremitsu down,

"*—Miss Aoi is actually a straightforward but good girl. She's really cute.*

However, Hikaru too gave up because of Aoi's tears and the words of his cousin Asai.

But now, Koremitsu and Hikaru were celebrating Aoi's birthday together.

The light of the sunset lit upon Aoi's petite and white face, dyeing it red. She looked outside the window, her eyes dazzling as her tender lips let out a smile.

"*—Miss Aoi's cute, isn't she?*

At this point, he fully agreed with Hikaru's words.

Aaah, that's right.

Aoi kept screaming as she rode on the exciting thriller rides, and though her legs were wobbly to a point where she could not stand up, she still forced herself, grumbling as she held onto Koremitsu's hand.

She showed that abashed expression when he handed her the photo and flowers.

She was completely red when Koremitsu struggled to put the pendant on her neck while she lowered her head, nearly buried in his chest.

After that, she smiled happily at him.

She shuddered slightly, ostensibly about to cry as she watched how Koremitsu sang her a birthday song desperately.

When she held onto the cup of milkshake,

"I can't take hot stuff."

She puffed a few times as she drank it.

"It's sweet and tasty."

She narrowed her eyes happily.

Even Koremitsu, who had been watching this from aside, felt a sense of happiness.

She would show a sniveling expression with her teary eyes from time to time, causing Koremitsu's heart to race as it experienced sweetness. This heartbeat caused him to unexpectedly recall a few important things.

Ahh, that's right, Hikaru.

Your Aoi is extremely cute.

The duo seated in front of Koremitsu really looked like a matching couple.

She was a cute girlfriend who was straightforward and yet a little stubborn, and he was a boyfriend who gently embraced all these aspects as he gently watched over her.

They looked like a blissful couple.

But Aoi's eyes could not see Hikaru.

It must have been painful for Hikaru.

But he could only smile.

Koremitsu felt crushed as the sadness ate away inside, heating his body up—

I'll pass her your feelings in your stead, Hikaru.

He muttered in his heart.

The Ferris Wheel stopped. Koremitsu held Aoi's hand gently as he treated it as a fragile item, and supported her as she stepped onto the ground.

The sky outside had darkened, and the first star twinkled in the sky.

The street lamps lit up in the park, and the visitors that came here with their families returned home.

Koremitsu held Aoi's hand gently as he brought her to the fountain in the middle of the theme park.

The water pillar shot into the deep blue night sky, while the scattered water droplets and the waterfall-like blue water pillar were lit by the blue, pink and bright yellow lights, dazzling like a fantasy.

Aoi was speechless, inebriated by the lights.

The light shone upon her white tender side face, and her flowing black hair looked more radiant than usual, making her look more alluring.

Her slender figure looked like it was going to dissolve into this rainbow-like light.

Hikaru stood in front of the fountain—in front of them Koremitsu and Aoi with and looked over with a gentle expression. His eyes were gradually filled with sadness.

Koremitsu harbored the same feelings as Hikaru as he looked over at Aoi.

Aoi looked towards the fountain, and suddenly spoke up,

"I'm really thankful to you for celebrating my birthday in lieu of Hikaru. I didn't believe that you were Hikaru's friend right from the beginning, but I feel like Hikaru's with me when you're standing by me, that he's talking to me. Now I can firmly believe so."

Aoi turned around and looked up at Koremitsu.

Her eyes were full of trust, and her face showed a light smile.

"You're Hikaru's friend, Mr Akagi."

Koremitsu's numb heart started to heat up.

A sweet feeling spread within his body.

Aoi's words resonated with the memory Koremitsu had when he walked under the moonlight with Hikaru sidelong.

Right now, I think I look like I'm going to cry.

But no matter how happy I am, I can't cry now. I have to pass on Hikaru's feelings until the end.

Koremitsu swallowed the rising heat in his throat, and spoke,

"Then, as Hikaru's friend, I'll now present you the 7th present, Aoi. The 7th item is—Hikaru's 'heart'."

Aoi widened her eyes, startled.

Koremitsu held the passion within him as he looked down at Aoi.

Hikaru was standing behind her.

He was looking at her with a gentle—sad, passionate expression .

"Hikaru loved you ever since he was young. As a friend, I can conclude that it wasn't a lie."

Aoi widened her eyes as her breath abated, listening on to Koremitsu's words.

"Hikaru wanted to celebrated to your 17th birthday like this, to provide you a surprise, and to express his true feelings about you."

Koremitsu tried his best to declare.

He declared the feelings Hikaru had, who still remained on this world with regret even after his death.

He said out Hikaru's true thoughts.

"You're a very important person to Hikaru, Aoi!"

Tears and bewilderment appeared in Aoi's eyes.

She could not believe it.

Her face was contorted as she showed this disbelief on her face, and at this moment, Hikaru followed.

He said out the thoughts he never had a chance to say when he was alive.

"Miss Aoi, I always felt that I couldn't go out with you with a nonchalant attitude. That's why, when I sent one of the presents to the floral shop before heading to the Shinshu Villa, I decided to start afresh with you. At that time, I really hoped that you would become my most beloved. If you're with me, Miss Aoi, I think I'll live through every day in a fruitful manner. At that time, I wrote on the letter with a hopeful and blissful attitude."

Hikaru said with a gentle yet depressed voice as he faced Aoi's face, and softly narrated the words Aoi could not hear.

Hikaru's hope.

Hikaru's future.

Aoi was very, very important to him - like a white flower blooming over a sacred field.

Koremitsu continued.

"You're a special person to Hikaru, not the kind he could simply reach out to so casually. He really treasured you. You're necessary for that blissful future Hikaru described! He really wanted to be with you forever!"

Aoi's eyebrows and lips trembled.

Hikaru embraced Aoi from behind and confessed her passionately.

"You're my beloved, Miss Aoi. And I really mean it."

These words should not be able to reach Aoi's ears—

But she raised her hands up slowly.

The water pillars shot high into the night sky, and the rainbow illuminating the fountain disappeared into thin air.

What replaced this were white, glimmering flashes that bedighted cascades of water flowing freely.

They looked like stars filling the sky!

The water, running upwards, was as dazzling as the stars in the sky, falling back to the earth in suspension and evaporating into a gleaming cloud.

Aoi's eyes were agape.

"Stars…?"

She muttered with a trembling voice, and covered her mouth with both hands, seemingly swallowing her sobbing.

—If you hear me, even if it's a little bit, please put a finger on your lips to let me know...

The voice back seemed to finally reach her.

Aoi cried as she put her fingers at her lips.

Hikaru narrowed his eyes too as he too was almost in tears. He gently moved his mouth a little as he let out a gentle, soft voice.

"Didn't I promise to make the stars in the sky fall if I want to confess to you? Now I'll surely show that I really loved you."

Beads of tears rolled down Aoi's large eyes.

She put her fingers at her mouth, choking a few times as she responded.

"…I love…you too."

She confessed hoarsely.

"I too, wanted to spend more time with you, Hikaru…I love Hikaru most…I loved him more than anyone else ever since we were kids."

The dazzling water pillars danced, now carrying with them the shimmering stars. They twinkled, smiling as they stood beside the two loves who had finally managed to express their feelings.

Koremitsu's heart felt like it was flying in the sky as he basked in the light.

The actual 7th present was a kiss.

Actually, I intended to confess to Miss Aoi in front of the fountain and kiss her gently—Hikaru did say to Koremitsu this with a radiant smile.

And then, I'll be real lovers with Miss Aoi.

From then on, I'll treasure her alone.

I won't hurt Miss Aoi. I'll hold her hand and open a new future, creating all sorts of important memories. No matter whether it's rain or shine, whether it's breezy or not, we'll laugh and love each other all the way.

We'll head to a wonderful future—a future filled with love.

—it will be the greatest happiness for me if Miss Aoi can become my beloved.

—I'LL TREASURE MISS AOI WHOLEHEARTEDLY!

Hikaru stood behind Aoi and whispered parting words to her.

"I really love you, Miss Aoi, how you try to act tough, how clumsy you are. If I'm still alive, I'll keep loving you. I really want to go for picnics and beach trips just like how it was when we're young. I still want to create a flower crown for you again, Miss Aoi."

Aoi called his name in a low wail.

Hikaru could not kiss her.

Thus, Koremitsu followed Hikaru's lead by embracing her.

He tried to pass on Hikaru's warmth and passion, even if it was a little, as he embraced Aoi.

Aoi's body was petite and slender, seemingly sinking into his chest, and Koremitsu held her in his arms gently, afraid that she would break if he exerted strength.

"I'm sorry for hurting you so much, Miss Aoi. Please continue to live happily and bloom."

Hikaru's voice was breaking.

He could no longer continue.

Aoi, Aoi, these are Hikaru's true feelings, his inner thoughts. The final birthday present he wanted to give you, Aoi.

Aoi kept calling Hikaru's name as she remained in Koremitsu's embrace, weeping.

Though Koremitsu was embracing her, it felt like Hikaru himself was the one embracing her.

"Hikaru, Hikaru."

Her hoarse sobbing voice continued to call out.

Hikaru made the stars above Aoi fall upon her.

He had proven to her that he loved her from the bottom of his heart, and he gave her the best birthday present on her 17th birthday.

Aoi finally admitted her love for Hikaru.

She had loved Hikaru ever since young, and her small frame was filled with sweetness, bitterness, sadness, yet she continued to yearn for their togetherness.

However, she thought that Hikaru and Asai were a better fit. He would call her 'Asa', while he would call Aoi 'Miss Aoi' like an outsider, causing Aoi to be unable to be honest with herself.

After that, she would often say begrudging things to Hikaru whenever she saw him with so many pretty ladies around him.

Every painting Aoi drew was a place Hikaru appeared before.

Hikaru's presence was in the paintings depicting the empty gym, the staircase in the morning, the vending machine in the evening.

He smiled as he looked over at Aoi.

"I love you most, Hikaru…I really love you…love you."

She was finally able to say the 'I really love you' that had been hidden in her heart for 10 years.

She was forgiven—liberated.

She was saved.

She decided to keep the presence of Hikaru on this painting, that painting, how he gave her a smiling face.

What was his expression when he looked at her?

Now, she would definitely be able use her true feelings to draw him, to leave the proof that Hikaru lived.

Farewell, Miss Aoi.

An airy muttering fell upon her ears. Perhaps she was hallucinating?

Aoi's voice was already hoarse, and the tears continued to flow down. Hikaru's gentle friend continued to embrace her tightly.

Epilogue - Back Then, When I Met You on Earth

You really are my hero, Koremitsu.

Thank you for passing on my feelings to Miss Aoi.

If you had not encouraged me on the roof back then, Aoi would never have received these presents.

Hey, Koremitsu. You may not realize it, but when I first spoke with you on the courtyard corridor in school, I said to, "Mr. Akagi, I forgot my Classics textbook today. Can you please lend me yours?" Actually, that was an excuse I came up with to meet you again.

It was the same when I said, "I'll come over to your class to borrow your textbook then."

Back there, you looked at me without understanding what was going on at all.

But I wanted to approach you.

I wanted to get close to you.

That was because I personally witnessed you using your body to block the truck.

I suppose that was in late March.

I was on my way, when you suddenly shouted aloud.

“Gramps! Watch out! Come back!”

I heard it.

When I looked back, I saw a red-haired boy of the same age as me chasing after an old man.

“That’s dangerous! Gramps! Not that way!”

You kept yelling.

When the truck suddenly rushed over, it was about to knock into the old man, but you flew over without hesitation. You pushed him aside, and got yourself knocked down by the truck.

“Danger!”

I did yell this before.

You were sent to the hospital by ambulance, and had to be admitted there for a while. But you were amazing to be able to work hard with such risk for the sake of others.

Thus, once I knew that this hero at the cross junction is a freshman at my high school, I felt really excited, and felt that it was fate at work.

I heard about all sorts of rumors about you.

What infamous delinquent, hell hound, the red devil, how you beat another school’s delinquent army to near death.

But I didn’t feel scared at all.

That's because I knew that you were that hero.

Everyone whispered about how you're always one who always challenged others, one against many, and never bullied the weak.

Once I understood how you're just a little clumsy and easily misunderstood, my opinion of you changed for the better, and I kept on hoping that you could be discharged and enter school someday.

So, that morning, when I heard you had finally appeared, I immediately ran to the courtyard, got in front of you, and waited for you to pass by the big pillar along the corridor.

You definitely didn't know how overjoyed I was to meet with the hero I admired, and my heart fluttered as I wondered about how I could be friends with you.

Oh yes, I was the one who sent the flowers you liked to the hospital.

That flower's name is called Magnolia Kobus.

The pure white flower signals the arrival of Spring, and I suppose it has this name because its protruded bud and stem look like a fist[12].

One of the floral meanings is 'welcome'.

The other is 'friendship'.

From that moment on, I always wished to be your friend.

I intended to head to your classroom and borrow the textbook. After you would lend me your textbook, and I returned it to you, I wanted to ask , "Can you be my friend?"

This was the request I wanted to ask of you.

Since I died before it could be done, you would be bothered if I ask to be your friend as a ghost, so I deliberately said that I forgot.

But I never thought you would be the one to say, "We're friends."

To me, that was the best thing that ever happened in my life.

I really felt delighted deep within - really blissful.

Why am I sticking with you?

On the day of the funeral, my photo was hung on the altar, and the girls were calling my name, weeping. I wanted to comfort them all, but couldn't do anything, and felt despair as a result.

It was the same when Miss Aoi exclaimed "liar!". I knew all too well how much I hurt her, and tried my best to think of what I could do to fulfill my promise.

But nobody could hear my voice, and I couldn't move. When I thought that my soul would leave Earth like this, I saw you among the visitors.

"Mr. Akagi!"

I lost all control over myself as I yelled.

“Please help me! Lend me your strength, Mr Akagi!”

I thought that since you would stand up for an old man you are unfamiliar with at the cross junction, you might be able to help me.

That’s why I called out.

“Mr Akagi, Mr Akagi!”

I called out countless times, and you finally stopped and turned your head around.

At this moment, my body, which couldn’t move no matter what I did, immediately went towards you.

At that time, you were the one who responded to my desperate pleas.

After that, you accepted my one-sided request when we’re still not friends, I caused you lots of trouble, and yet you helped me.

To a point where we became friends.

It was great that I could meet you on this Earth when I was alive.

Thank you.

Really, thank you.

You’re my hero, the best friend I had.

……Are you crying, Koremitsu?

Didn't we promise?

You must smile and send me off when I make my journey towards space.

That's why—

On Monday morning, Koremitsu met Honoka in front of the shoe locker, and bowed his head to her.

"Sorry for causing you so much trouble, Shikibu. Thank you."

"Don't, well, don't say it so formally. Hey, lift your head. People will think I'm your boss if they see it."

Honoka said anxiously.

Koremitsu lifted his face with an, "Uu", and she was at a loss of words. She stuttered, lowered her voice, and said with a slightly nervous tone,

"Sp-speaking of which, what happened—between you and Her Highness Aoi? Erm, did you go on a date on Sunday?"

"…Ahh."

Koremitsu answered with a hoarse voice.

Recalling yesterday's events brought him grief and anguish.

Honoka panicked.

"Ah! It's alright if you don't want to talk about it. So Her Highness Aoi didn't show up after all. Your…eyes, they look red… it can't be helped. Right, life's not like you thought it was. Even I have lots of adversities in my life."

"No, I went to the theme park."

"Oh, alone?"

Honoka's eyes watered.

"With Aoi."

"Ehhh!? Ho-hold on, that means, everything went well? You became lovers with Her Highness Aoi!?"

Honoka, shocked, widened her eyes and made a fuss.

Koremitsu shook his head.

"Not lovers; it's not what you think. I just had some things I needed to tell her no matter what, and I've finished saying what I had to. That's all."

"Is that so…so the theme park's the last memory."

"Yeah."

"It's great to be lovelorn in such a splendid manner."

What do you mean by lovelorn? He wondered, while Honoka looked extremely relieved.

She reached out and patted Koremitsu on the head.

It was a warm, gentle expression. Her hand on his face was comforting.

"…Women."

He would have, normally, yelled at her to stop touching him, but now, he could only murmur.

"Eh?"

"Up 'til now, I've always thought that there were no decent women, but my view has changed…there're good girls like you too, Shikibu."

"Yeah, no way, I'm…"

"Women…are gentle and cute…"

He recalled Aoi in his embrace, and her face as she sobbed and called out Hikaru's name, felt a pang feeling in his heart, and muttered.

Honoka's hand, which was patting Koremitsu's hand, stopped, and her face reddened.

"!"

"She felt really tender when I embraced her, like a twig that may snap if I'm not careful."

"!!"

"And I was about to kiss her…"

Koremitsu was yanked from his reverie by a kick.

"Ugh! What are you doing!?"

"YOU'RE THE WORST!! T-T-T-T-THIS IS WHY YOU WERE DUMPED!"

She blushed as she yelled, and quickly left.

"What's with her!?"

And, once again, Koremitsu thought women were ridiculous.

"Good morning, Mr Akagi."

A cute voice called out.

He looked over to see Aoi standing there shyly.

"Good- good morning."

Koremitsu greeted her in a slightly embarrassed manner.

"Thank you for yesterday."

"Did you sleep well last night?"

Aoi's eyes were still bright red, probably from crying so hard last night. However, a smile crossed her lips, and she answered,

"Yes, I had a proper breakfast this morning too."

"I see."

Koremitsu's eyes were as red as Aoi's, and he smiled back at her.

"Well, I want to draw, a picture…of Hikaru. Will you please look at it when it's complete, Mr Akagi?"

"Yeah."

Koremitsu answered without hesitation, and this brought delight to Aoi's eyes.

"It's a promise."

She ran off, seemingly embarrassed.

Koremitsu watched her leave with relief.

That's great, Hikaru.

Your thoughts have reached Aoi. She's all energetic now, and you can head to heaven peacefully.

"Miss Aoi can paint portraits? Her sketch of Asa from elementary school was rather miserable though. I really hope she doesn't draw me like that!"

"OI! WHY ARE YOU STILL AROUND!"

Koremitsu yelled as he pointed at the ceiling, scaring the surrounding students.

"AREN'T YOU SUPPOSED TO ENTER HEAVEN ONCE YOUR WISH IS FULFILLED!?"

That was supposed to be the case.

But at this point, he floated above Koremitsu, apparently carefree.

As he did before, he would follow Koremitsu to the toilet and bath, saying "Well, I won't mind since I'm more or less used to it~ " with a refreshing smile.

"Why did you come in school with such a dazzling expression!? And your hair's all tidied up like that!

Veins protruded from Koremitsu's temples, and Hikaru's eyes smiled with delight.

"That's because I still have to find a girlfriend who's good at laughing for you, Koremitsu. How can I leave Earth like that after seeing you cry your eyes red?"

Koremitsu blushed at Hikaru's words.

Last night, after walking Aoi home, Koremitsu had a heartfelt conversation with Hikaru, and he could not help but cry when thinking that it was time for Hikaru to depart. However, Hikaru said,

"Didn't we promise? You're to smile and watch me leave when I head to space. That's why—I have to cure your habit of crying, and you have to learn how to smile before I leave."

"I, I'm fine with myself right now. I don't need a girlfriend either way."

"I do want to make you happy though. Also…"

Hikaru's eyes were slightly gloomy, and he seemed to be hiding something as he slightly lowered his eyelids, but his gaze lifted immediately afterwards.

"Actually, there are still another 4, 5 girls I'm very concerned with. No, maybe 40, 50 of them?"

Koremitsu, haunted by Hikaru, widened his eyes, and bellowed .

"WHAT DID YOU SAY!?"

"You'll definitely help me, right? We're close friends after all, right?"

Hikaru descended to the ground and ostensibly fawned over Koremitsu, grabbing him by the shoulders and smiling. After

Koremitsu grasped that this annoying friend of his was truly still on Earth, he couldn't help but clutch his head and groan.

"Ugh, what kind of joke is this!! HURRY UP AND ASCEND TO HEAVEN ALREADY, THIS HAREM BASTARD~~~~~~~~~!!"

The other students ducked aside in fear as they watched Koremitsu Akagi head towards the classroom with a sour demeanor.

Asai watched over this with a sharp glare.

Aoi came back late the previous night, and though her eyes were red, her expression was surprisingly calm.

"I'm sorry for going out without telling you, Asa."

She did not apologize tentatively as she usually would,

"Did you go out with Akagi?

And once Asai asked her, Aoi answered with a smile,

"Yes. I was really happy. It felt like I was reborn."

Asai felt a sense of defeat she could not say.

Koremitsu Akagi…what exactly did he say to Aoi?

No matter how Asai persisted, Aoi did not say.

How much did Hikaru say to him?

Don't tell me, even that—

"Are you very concerned about Akagi? President Saiga?"

Unwittingly, a petite, short-haired girl—Hiina Oumi of the news club—approached Asai and stood beside her. She played a sincere expression and chuckled at the frowning Asai.

"You hardly have anyone around you who's actually straightforward, and even though he doesn't look decent, and that's refreshing for you, I guess? It's the same for me too; there're a lot of students in our school who look well-mannered, but are rotten and despicable. I suppose the nobles are like this, right? I'm a peasant who entered during middle school, so I'm not really well acquainted with that."

She ignored Asai's icy expression and continued quickly.

"Also—"

Hiina's expression shone with the dazzling light of youth.

"Akagi proclaims himself as Lord Hikaru's friend, so he probably knows how Lord Hikaru died. Ah, but about that rumor; I think you might have an idea, President Saiga."

Asai intended to ignore it, but Hiina quickly raised her cellphone screen up to Asai.

Asai gasped.

Hiina continued with a tone of harassment in her voice.

"Because President Saiga smiled during Lord Hikaru's funeral."

The screen showed Asai, sitting alone amongst the many sobbing girls, a strange smile resting on her lips.

What kind of person is Hikaru Mikado exactly?

Is there really anyone who can truly understand the heart of the garden's owner?

On the day of the funeral, when the chilling rain descended, there were a lot of flowers scattered around Hikaru's coffin.

The blooming flowers basked under the radiance of Hikaru's were dyed a black color of gloom.

It was like a wilted and desolate garden, having lost its owner.

While everyone was washing their faces with tears, I was the only one smiling.

How laughable.

The women who mourned for his death are really laughable. They don't know anything. How pathetic.

I was the only one who knew of your final moments.

I was the one who ended your life.

Confusing others, yet incomprehensible.

The one beloved by all the flowers—Hikaru Mikado.

You sin will never be forgiven even once you die!

Your Wish

In his 3rd year of elementary school, Koremitsu did not have a single friend.

When they went hiking in the hills previously, he was the one sitting on the last seat in the bus. When they reached their destination, his classmates were gathered in groups, chatting and laughing away as they trekked on, but Koremitsu continued to keep his mouth shut, and his sharp expression was fixated forward as he wordlessly head towards the hilltop alone.

There were beautiful flowers beside his path, birds perched atop the branches, but he did not look at him.

He knew, at the tender age of 9, that if he were to meet them in the eyes, the birds would be fearful of him and run away, just like his classmates.

Even when they reached the hilltop, he would not talk with others, and would find a place where nobody would notice him. Once he found such a place, he would set his picnic cloth and eat his bento alone.

That was because, if the teacher saw it, he would probably say,

“Everyone, please let Akagi join in too.”

He might say such things.

In that case, the students who were chatting and eating happily would quiet down and avert their eyes as they lower their heads, fidgeting around.

—Akagi seems really scary. That red hair belongs to a delinquent.

—I heard he fought against a fifth year and injured him.

—I heard that he bit the bulldog Shingen belonging to Tanaka in front of the school.

He knew all too well these rumors that were said about him.

You're too arrogant even though you're just an underclassman. The 5th years looking for trouble said this, and Koremitsu ducked past a hole in the metal fence in order to escape. The 5th year too tried to follow through, but was stuck inside, and because he struggled as he was stuck, the tips of the wire fence cut his arms and back, causing him to bleed all over, and he wailed out in pain.

The famous bulldog, Shingen, which often barked at students leapt towards Koremitsu as its collar ring was released.

He tried to restrain Shingen and pressed his head down on its face. The passers-by, upon seeing this, yelled—3rd year Akagi just bit Shingen—and the crowd gathered, creating quite a commotion.

"I…it's fine even if I don't have a friend."

"Did you eat your bento with your friends?" his aunt Koharu asked as he came back from his trek, not thinking about what he felt at all, and he answered quietly,

Everyone, says that, I'm arrogant, unsociable, a delinquent, when they see my face.

Mom left me behind when she went off. I definitely have a face nobody likes. I might as well not hope for others. If I say that I don't want to make friends right from the beginning, I won't have any lonely feelings.

But his once divorced aunt, who returned to her maiden house, spoke with a serious look on her face.

"Koremitsu, you may look a little less cute than the average, more violent, and a little more lacking in gentleness, but this can't be the excuse why you can't make friends. Your grandfather looks like you, he does have a calligraphy class for 40 years, and he has quite a few Go player friends in the neighborhood. Even I have friends who'll listen to my rambling."

Koremitsu widened his mouth in shock.

It was true—that both his grandfather and Koharu both had savage looks like Koremitsu.

When the three of them were gathered at the dining table, it looked like they were discussing some devious ploy. When they go for their rare shrine visit together during the New Year, the other tourists who came along would instantly avoid them.

A few days ago, the Akagi residence had a thief, who collapsed in fear once he saw grandfather hold the carving knife with a savage expression on his face as the latter worked on his art print. He wanted to escape, but upon reaching the kitchen, found Koharu chopping the mackerel in the kitchen with a bloodied knife , and was immediately restrained.

I thought I just entered a demon's lair—When he was questioned by the police, he shuddered as he admitted his guilt.

The neighbors muttered, seemingly pitying him…for entering that one particular house to steal.

But despite this, his grandfather and Koharu actually had friends.

Koharu taught him that despite his savage and scary appearance, these were not to be used as excuses for why he could not make friends. He was not to look for excuses, complain, give up easily, for that was not manly.

These were words of a senior who walked down the same arduous route, and they were immediately etched within the young Koremitsu's heart.

At the same time, he lifted his head up in hope.

"…Can I make friends too?"

Koremitsu asked with a throbbing anticipation.

"Yeah, that's why you have to try your best to form relationships with others. You won't succeed easily, but that's how you'll make 'real friends'."

"Real, friends?"

"Friends that are together for eternity are 'close friends'."

Close friends.

Those words caused a tremor in his heart.

Koremisu checked on the meaning of the term 'close friend' in the dictionary, and went towards the calligraphy classroom. Once the students left, he sat down on the table alone.

He grinded the ink and wrote 'close friend' in large font on the writing paper.

He continued to write the same words on every single piece of paper, again and again, and for every piece he wrote on, his heart soared higher.

In the end, there were pieces of paper with the words 'close friend' all around the table.

Such wonderful words.

Such awesome words.

He wiped off the sweat on his forehead, and his face was all red as he looked at the many ‘close friends’ in life.

I’ll take the best written words and put it under the pillow when I sleep.

Maybe I might finally dream of this close friend.

“Hikaru’s too indecent! I hate him!”

“Eh, Miss Aoi!”

Hikaru, who was in his 3rd year of elementary school, weakly called out.

“You made Aoi angry again?”

His cousin Asai came into the kids room, tagging out Aoi as she said coldly.

Asai and Aoi were 4th years, a year older than he, and the trio would often play together.

Recently, Aoi had begun to say things like, “You’re a playboy, Hikaru,” or, “You’re happier with other girls, right?” more often than she had before. She would glare at him through teary eyes, her cheeks puffed out. This was cute enough for Hikaru to wish he could bring her home.

“Miss Aoi asked me who’s in my group for the school trip, and I just answered ‘Erika, Fumiyo, Yuna, Minami, Shiori,’ that’s all.”

Even though Hikaru didn’t understand the situation, Asai questioned him.

“Don’t you have any boys in your group, Hikaru?”

“Well, the boys hate me. None of them are willing to bring me along. My classmate Fujiwara told me today ‘Don’t you dare to be arrogant; you were born out of wedlock.’ Erika scolded them a lot to help me, but the class broke into a huge argument between the boys and girls.

“—Hikaru, you’re special! Don’t talk with those outrageous boys.”

“—Hikaru, ignore those boys and do homework with us. You can form a group with us for the trip.”

Ever since he was in kindergarten, the girls were the ones who had been helping him, protecting him, lending him textbooks when he forgot. Every girl was extremely gentle, and he felt as

relieved as being in a flower field when he was with them. He really liked them all, but he wanted to play with boys to.

However, when he forgot his textbook, the boys would look away when he ask them for help, and would deliberately make things difficult for him by telling him 'go borrow from the girls'.

"Hey, Asa, I really want to get along well with the boys and make friends with them. Erika keep saying things like "I want to be your bride, Hikaru" or "I want to be his girlfriend", but this and being friends are two different things…what kind of people are willing to be my friends?"

The older, wiser, and calmer cousin went silent for a while, and then said without holding back.

"The one fatal flaw you have is that you're too obedient to your desires, Hikaru, and I might say that it's because you're too much of a playboy. You should get a friend who's prudent."

Asai used adult terms that Hikaru did not know of. 'Desire' and 'obedient' were terms that she would say when she told him off. Perhaps she was saying that he was too straightforward with what he wanted to get, what he wanted to do.

But,

"What does prudent person means?"

"It means a wise person who thinks sensibly before acting and thinking."

"But isn't that like you, Asa?"

Hikaru looked over at Asai with a clear expression.

Though her expression was aloof, Asai's shoulders jerked slightly.

"That's because you're the smartest and most reliable one amongst all I know, Asa. You taught Miss Aoi and I lots of things."

He giggled.

"Oh yes! Can't you be my friend, Asa?"

"No way."

"Eh? Why?"

Hikaru lowered his eyebrows, and Asai said with a firm, cold expression.

"Boys and girls can't be friends. Even if they're temporary, it's just appears to be, and can't be real. It's a fragile friendship that will soon break. That's why you have to make friends with boys."

"Fragile?"

"It means easily broken, like the icicles on the roof in winter."

"Is that so…fragile…I can't be friends with girls, is it? It's a little unfortunate."

Hikaru looked utterly devastated. He thought that he managed

Asai remained speechless as she looked back at Hikaru.

“If only you were a boy, Asa.”

Asai’s shoulders jerked slightly.

But Hikaru immediately shook his head, smiled and looked back at Asai.

“No, I think it’s good that you’re a girl after all, Asa. I get it! Asa ! I’ll try my best to think of a way to make friends with boys.”

Asai looked away uncomfortably.

“…That’s good. If you play with boys instead of girls, you probably won’t make Aoi angry.”

And then, she said curtly,

“Aoi’s still waiting downstairs, probably wondering what to do. Go find her.”

“Yes, thanks, Asa.”

Hikaru ran out of the children’s room with a cheerful expression, and dashed down the stairs.

Just like what Asai said, the white ribbon could be seen from the corner of the staircase.

"Miss Aoi!"

He grabbed Aoi by the hands as she tried to run away, and smiled, saying,

"Wait for me. If I can make a male friend, you won't go back angrily. And then, we're remain close to each other."

Aoi blushed as she looked around, her lips opening and closing at times,

"I-I don't know."

She answered, seemingly angry and yet troubled.

At night, Hikaru laid on his bed and looked at the stars outside. He made a wish,

"I hope that I can make friends with boys. I've been too obedient to my own desire, and it'll be good if I can make a prudent friend."

But there was no boy in the class who was like Asa.

It seems that it'll be difficult to find a prudent friend like what Asa described.

And speaking of which, if I want a prudent person, won't Asa be enough…

I'll add another condition then.

"A courageous person will do too."

Right, like a hero who helps everyone.

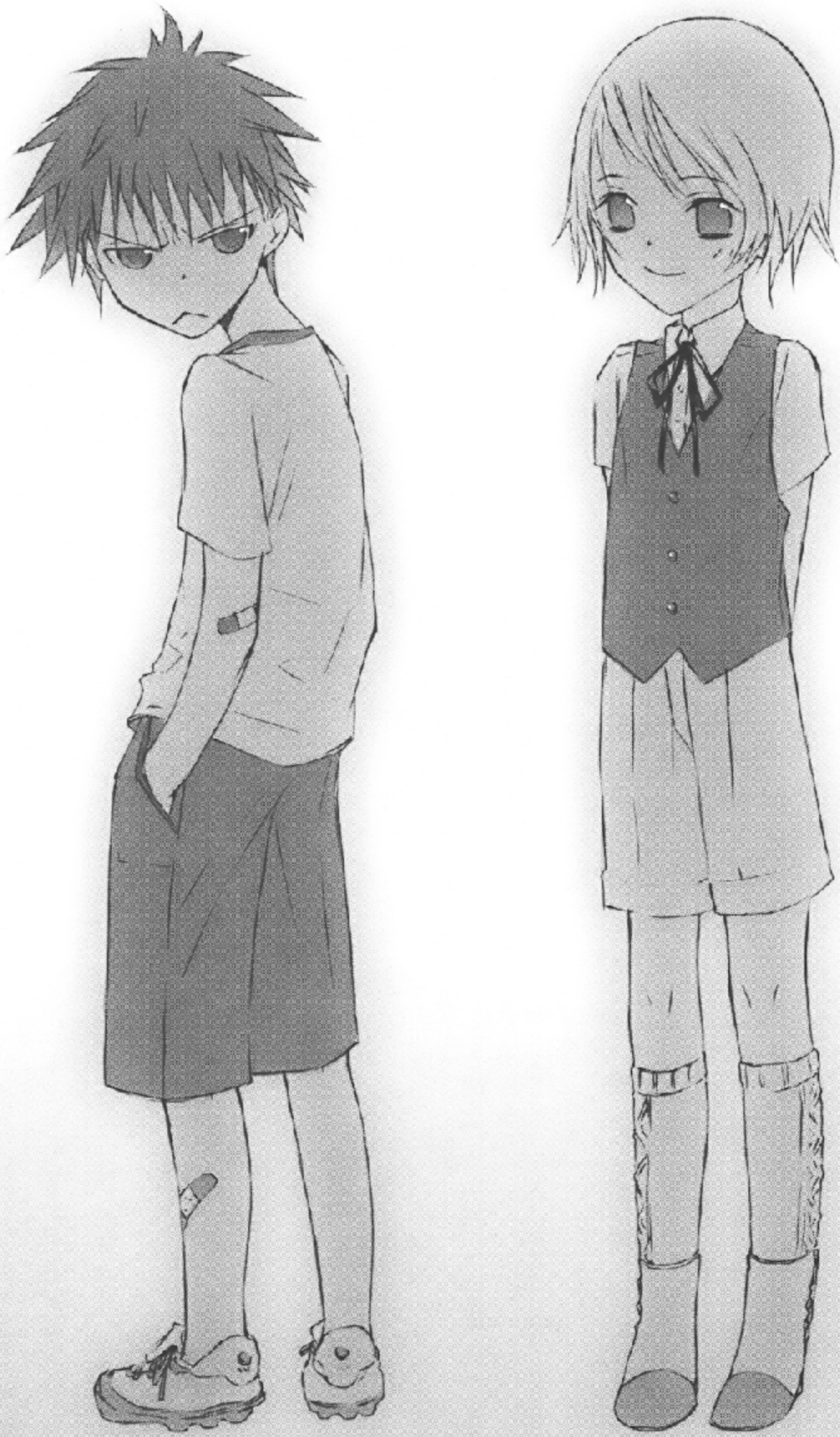
That kind of friend must be great too.

He buried his head into the pillow, and closed his eyes delightedly.

It would be great if he could make a real, real friend one of these days.

That person may be from another class.

In that case, once class ends, he'll run to the friend's class and shout,



"Hey, I forgot to bring my textbook. Can you please lend me yours—"

Author's Notes

Hello, I am Mizuki Nomura. Thank you for being the first volume “Aoi” of the new series “When Hikaru Was On the Earth ……”.

As I previewed in the “Soft-boiled Author and the Book Girl Muze”, I based this story off of the “Tale of Genji”. There are also elements from another famous work in the setting too, and to the readers who understand, please read on with a hearty smile.

I wrote the “Soft-boiled Author and the Book Girl Muze” during the end of March last year, and though I gave ample time for this new series, all sorts of public and private affairs caused me to feel dejected, wondering, “I can’t possibly make the deadline and release this in May” anymore. It’s really~~~ great that I can release this successfully!

The initial design for the protagonist Koremitsu is that he’s a healthy (?) delinquent growing up in a normal family. However, since ‘a delinquent is the second greatest enemy of an otaku’, I changed him to be an unfortunate boy mistaken for a delinquent. Then, I thought, ‘if he’s tall, handsome, he’ll feel like someone who has a good life, and the biggest enemy of an otaku is someone who has the good life’. After trimming and adding a few parts, I have this current Koremitsu.

That’s why,

THE PROTAGONIST IS NOT A DELINQUENT~!

It might feel a little weird now, but it will soon improve…I guess.

Speaking of which, how would the questionnaire look after 3rd place? I am rather curious.

The name of this series is 'When Hikaru Was On the Earth…", and the name was derived from the drama troupe Caramel Box ' When You Were On Earth'. When, I saw this title for the first time, I wondered what kind of story it was. Unfortunately, the public performance had already ended, but I chanced upon an opportunity to read the script after the public performance ended. This is true a heartbreaking story, and coincidentally, the protagonist's little sister knows how to paint too. Her role overlaps with Aoi's role in the arts clubroom, and it certainly is inexplicable.

A lot of things really happened when I was creating the first volume of "Hikaru".

One of it is regarding my workplace. I had nothing to complain about my work environment and treatment, and I wanted to keep working there until retirement. However, bad financial performance caused it to close down at the end of the year.

I wanted to find a new job after writing the new work, but I still had not finalized the story in at the end of April. I had been staying at home for entire days, and it was winter, so the electric bills were certainly going to be high. When I saw the unknown astronomical number that far surpassed my imagination on the bill , I nearly fainted.

I had been putting on weight, my strength was becoming insufficient, and I could not take care of my beauty and health. I swore to myself: hurry up and find a new part-time job!

Recently, a lot of people had been asking me 'Is being a writer not enough to feed you? Are you really living a distressed life?'. Perhaps this is because I once wrote about me working on part-time job in one of the afterwords.

Sorry to make everyone worry, but this is not the case. Ever since I started working with Famitsu Bunko, the work is enough for me to live a steady life, which is a fortunate. But I really do not like to have trouble, and like to stay at home; if I do not go out to work and snuggle at home like this, I may end up sleeping 12 hours every day…thus, I feel it is better for me to find a part-time job in this situation.

Wearing neat clothing and walking down the morning roads carefreely feels as relaxing as sleeping in like this. This is why I have to find work!

As preluded at the end of the volume, the second volume of the " Hikaru" series is "Yuugao".

"Hikaru" is a story of separation. Once you finish reading it, you may feel sad, but you will feel a warmth feeling in your heart too. It will be great if I can write such a story. After "Yuugao", I will try to continue with "Waka Murasaki" and "Oburozukiyo". Please continue to follow me until the end.

Year 2011, April 30th

Mizuki Nomura.

あとがき。

"文学少女"に続いまたご一緒することになりました。

よろしくお願い致します

今回はキャラデザが
難航しまくりで……。
みなさん3年目は変身しました。
コレミツが一番リテイクが少ないので
描くと なごむようになってしまった…。

ヤンキーというより
歌舞伎顔。

Notes

1. ↑ A Japanese-styled short legged table, to a point where people seated at it have to seat on cushions rather than chairs .
2. ↑ A type of Japanese paper. Can be used for virtually anything artistic.
3. ↑ A type of origami (paper folding) paper that has lots of attractive patterns on it.
4. ↑ A floor matting commonly used in Japanese-styled rooms.
5. ↑ Jūnihitoe, literally translated as twelve-layered robe; worn by court ladies, starting in the Heian Era. Noted for their intricate and graceful designs.
6. ↑ An all-female musical and theater troupe in Japan
7. ↑ Worn during the Heian period, 衣, Itai Sokudai), it was the most formal clothing worn by court officials
8. ↑ A V-cinema is the Japanese equivalent of the direct-to-video industry. Normally inferior in quality to cinema films, this would be the reality equivalent of the OVA (Original Video Animation) we see in animes nowadays.
9. ↑ Mito Kōmon is a Japanese Drama based on a lord and vice-shogun named Mitsukuni Tokugawa, who disguised himself as a civilian. When he reveals his seal case (which is, once at the end of every episode), it means that he's showing his true identity.
10. ↑ (羊) Japanese jelly that comprises of agar, sugar, and most commonly, red bean paste. It is eaten as a desert. Translated directly into 'sheep soup' because the original, made in China , was actually made from gelatin boiled from sheep.
11. ↑ Sushi of Fried tofu fill with rice inside

12. ↑ Kobushi means fist